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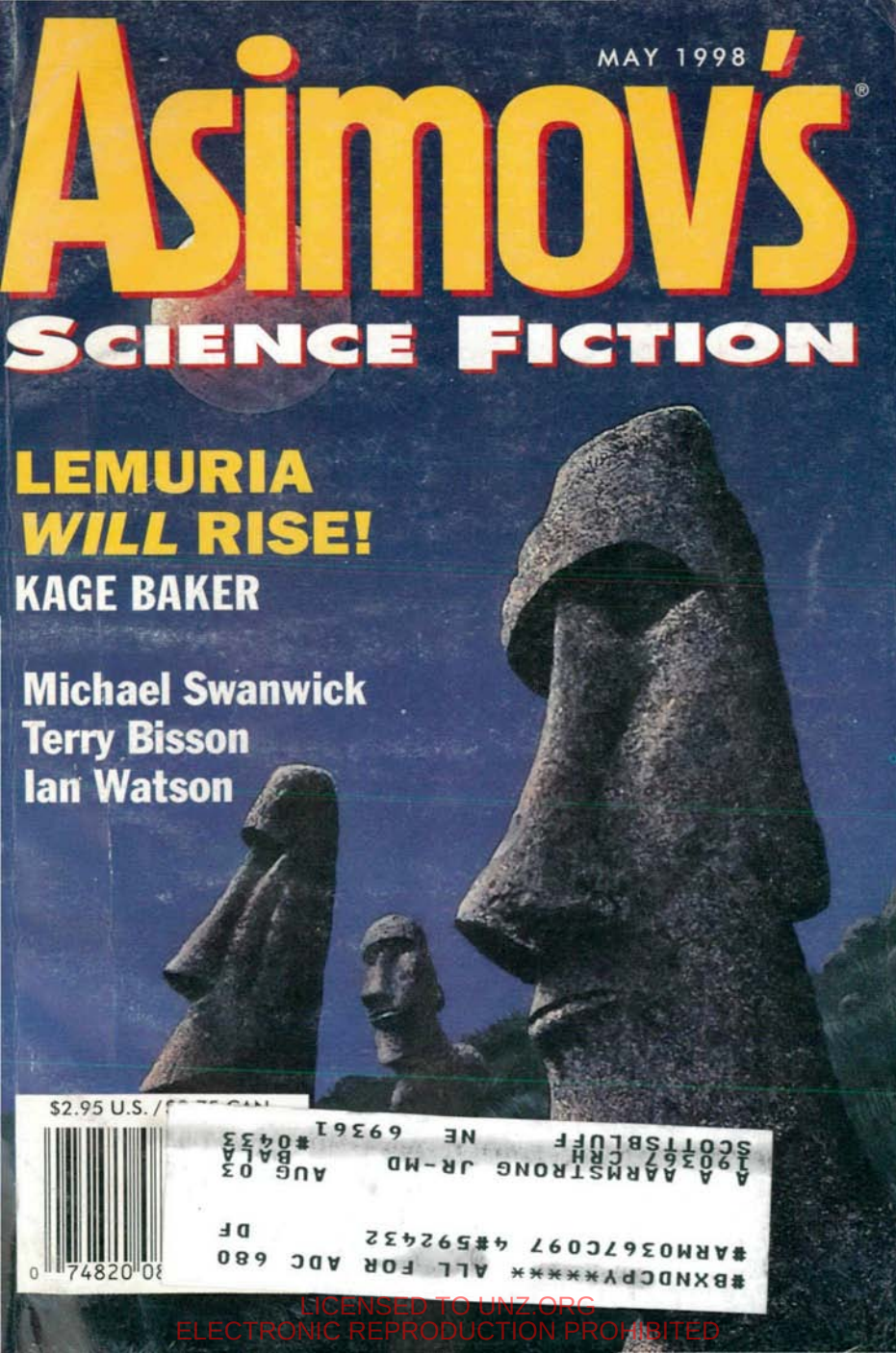

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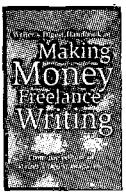

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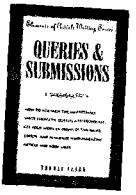

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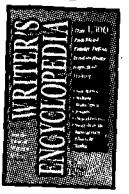

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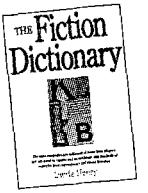

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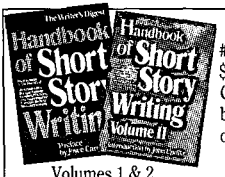

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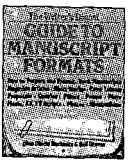

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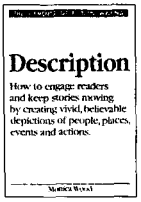
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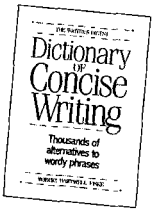

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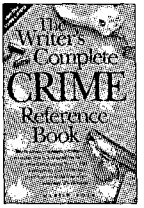

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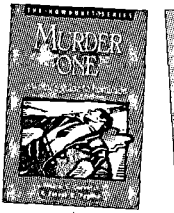

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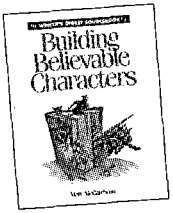

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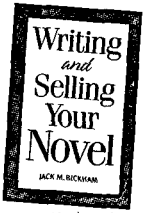

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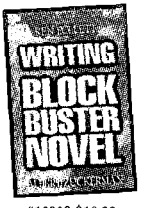

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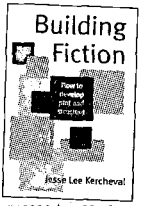

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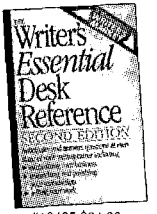

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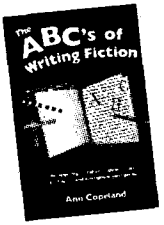

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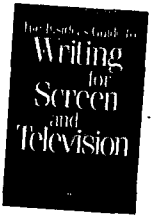

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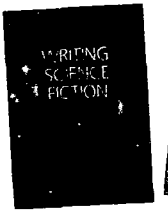

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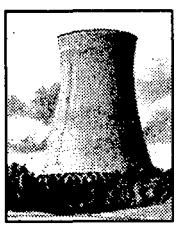

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

VOYAGE TO THE FAR SIDE OF THE MOON (Part 2)

Last month I told of my recent trip to Germany to address science fiction readers in the former East Germany, and the contrast I noted along the way between wealthy and robust West Germany and the strange, pallid place that forty years of Communist rule had fashioned in the east. The Deutsche Demokratische Republik, secluded for so long behind its wall of concrete and barbed wire and its less tangible but equally oppressive barriers of Stalinist ideology, struck me as an eerie and alien place, and the journey felt almost like a trip to the moon—the far side of the moon.

In Dresden, that once-beautiful city devastated by the Allied firebombing of February 1945, Karen and I were struck by the ghostly unreality of the place. The eighteenth-century architectural masterpieces of Dresden have been rebuilt, stone by stone, and visitors find it all but impossible to believe that they ever had been damaged, so meticulous is the reconstruction. Even so, the knowledge of the totality of the destruction keeps intruding. This is not an eighteenth-century German city, I kept thinking. It is a marvelously good modern imitation of one. Still, it's the only Dresden we have, and the reconstruction speaks eloquently of the splendor that the lost city must have had.

In the midst of the reconstructed area we saw our first Trabant—the rickety little Communist-era motorcar with the fiberglass hull and the two-stroke engine, which belches black fumes and makes more noise than a moped. There aren't many Trabants to be seen in East Germany any more; the streets are full of Hondas and Toyotas, and some Mercedes-Benzes, too, and Trabants are fast becoming collectors' items, souvenirs of the bad old days. To us the surviving Trabants seemed funny and charming, the way an ugly little dog can be. But to the people of the DDR there was nothing funny about the Trabant; they had to wait years for the privilege of buying one, and those were essentially the only cars available to them.

The klutzy sputtering Trabant became a symbol for us of the general mismanagement that had been the rule in the former DDR. In this land where central planning was a way of life, most of the plans were foolish ones. Hideous modern buildings were flung up randomly amidst mellow ancient ones; parking garages were incomprehensible mazes that could have been designed better by kindergarteners; our hotel, built along-

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side the lovely River Elbe, was positioned so that its windows faced *away* from the river view. And so on in a million tiny ways, nothing done really right and quite a lot done astonishingly wrong. The Trabant syndrome was everywhere. We could not keep from giggling at each new example of it.

But we had come to Dresden not to sneer at the follies of its overthrown masters but to meet with the local SF people; and that we did, to our great pleasure. The East German fans, insulated so long from the corrupting commercial forces of the decadent Western world by their puritanical government, still take science fiction terribly seriously, the way American fans did a quarter of a century ago. They look with disdain on the torrent of media-related books now invading their land—the *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* and *X-Files* items. They have little interest in pseudo-Tolkienesque fantasy. They see science fiction not as light entertainment but as a means of experiencing the vastness and wonder of the universe. In Dresden, the SF club before which I spoke, Urania SF Club TERRAsse, is actually a subsection of a larger organization, also called Urania, that is devoted to science. So the May 13 Urania program was a discussion of the works of Robert Silverberg; the May 14 one was a lecture on patterns of evolution; May 21, a visit to the planetarium; May 22, a talk by the Amerikanische SF-Bestseller-Autor Robert Silverberg und his wife, der SF-writer Karen Haber. And the questions aimed at us after we spoke were considerably broader and deeper than they usually are in the States.

The session took place in Dresden's brand-new public library for young people—it had opened just a week before—and here we saw, most vividly, how the DDR is beginning to escape at last from the terrible stagnation of the Communist years. An enthusiastic, bright-eyed young librarian showed us about. We visited the room for smaller children, a lively, inviting place full of enticing books and games, and the modern fiction section replete with Western paperbacks, and a CD library with both classical and popular music, and—most exciting of all—an Internet room where a dozen computers allowed youthful Dresdeners to reach out across the world. If only the Internet had come into existence ten years earlier, the grim walls of concrete and barbed wire that kept East Germany cut off from the world would have fallen long ago.

After the meeting we went to dinner with our hosts and a few of the other attendees. Much of the discussion dealt with the current state of East Germany and the problems that its people have had in adjusting to the strange new world of capitalism now that the barriers that kept them literally imprisoned in their own country are down. The most poignant moment, I think, came when one woman—articulate, intelligent—turned to Karen and said, "What is so very painful for us is that the West Germans say to us,

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not 'How could you have been so evil as to live under such a government?' but 'How could you have been so *stupid?*'"

The next day we were at a party at the home of the genial bookseller Michael Stoehr. The hour I spent exploring his extensive collection of East German SF greatly heightened my sense of having ventured into a remote and unfamiliar world.

The works of American and British science fiction writers have been routinely published in translation in West Germany for the past forty years. My own West German bibliography (painstakingly compiled for my visit by a local fan, Dirk Berger) lists fifty-three of my novels, hundreds of short stories. But none of that work was known in East Germany in DDR times. On Michael Stoehr's shelves I saw a couple of translations of books by Ursula K. Le Guin and Ray Bradbury, an Asimov or two, and one anthology of English-language SF stories of the 1950s and 1960s, edited by the East German writer Erik Simon. Plus some Verne, I think, and Wells, and a few other classics. Nothing else from the west: no Heinlein, no Herbert, no Sturgeon, no Leiber. (And no Silverberg!) Instead I saw rows of books by writers I had never heard of—Carlos Rasch, Gottfried Meinhold, Fred Hubert, Angela Steinmueller.

Were there any science fiction masterpieces among them? I'll never know. Some may have been mere leaden Marxist hackwork, and others may have been soaring

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explorations of the mysteries of space and time; but all these books, and their publishers, are gone now, vanished with the DDR. They will never be translated into English; never even republished in West Germany, in fact, because the big commercial West German houses are too busy with their programs of *Star Trek* novels and translations of mainstream American science fiction to have room even for the work of West German SF writers, let alone those of the East. And, as the prolific Erik Simon explained to me at the party, the East German writers, who once belonged to a Writers' Union and *received regular weekly paychecks* while they produced their books, must work as free-lancers now. Not one is able to earn a living at all from writing under the new and precarious economic system. They have turned to editing work, translation, teaching, anything. Their careers as writers are over.

After a few days in Dresden we went on to Leipzig, a big, bustling city, less of a theme park than Dresden, more a vital commercial center. The main event here was an all-day SF symposium, at which I read extracts from a couple of my books and Karen and I answered scores of questions. We found the eagerness of the questioners to understand more about the world of American science fiction—and about the world in general—extremely touching.

Leipzig was one of the main centers of the uprisings that over-

IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT

With our next issue, the June issue, *Asimov's* will be changing in size—the June issue will be about an inch taller than the May issue you're holding in your hands at the moment. An inch doesn't sound like much, I know, but there are several important consequences to the size-change that we thought you ought to know about. Most importantly, we hope that the increase in size will increase our visibility on the newsstands, where, at the moment, digest-sized titles tend to get lost because other, larger magazines are shuffled in front of them. But because of the increase in size, *Asimov's* might end up being shelved in some other section of the newsstand rack, so if you don't find the June *Asimov's* in exactly the same spot on your newsstand where you found this issue, keep looking around for it—it should be there somewhere!

We're enthusiastic about this change, and we think you will be, too—especially because of one other consequence of the change in size: with larger pages, we can jam even *more* high-quality fiction and nonfiction into each issue than is currently possible; the overall effect will be that we will be able to use about 10 percent more new fiction in each issue than we're able to use at the moment . . . so the June issue will be larger than the May issue in *every* way, not only a larger format, but more new material per issue as well!

—Gardner Dozois

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threw the Communist government. The Leipzig headquarters of the Stasi—the State Security Service, the dreaded secret police—has been turned into a museum, and in its grimy rooms we stared aghast at exhibits so sinister they were almost comic. A false abdomen, for example, with a camera peeking out of the navel. Counterfeit postmark-stampers to make the recipients of forged letters believe that they had come from overseas. Stacks of intercepted letters that had never been delivered; bugged telephones; moment-by-moment reports on the daily movements of ordinary citizens.

But in Leipzig, also, we visited the church where Bach had conducted the choir and Wagner had been baptized. We had dinner with our hosts in Auerbach's Cellar, a 450-year-old restaurant that figures importantly in Goethe's *Faust*. We toured the splendid museums. We reminded ourselves again and again that there was more to Germany than the Gestapo and the Stasi, that this was, after all, the land of Bach and Wagner and Beethoven, of Goethe and Heine and Mann, of Schopenhauer and Hegel and Kant. And came home with our heads whirling with thoughts of yesterday, today, and tomorrow in this extraordinary country that so thoroughly turned the twentieth-century topsy-turvy and now is struggling with all the consequences of its own tempestuous past, both Fascist and Communist, as the new century arrives.

What I saw in Germany was the devastating impact of prolonged socialism and the equally devastating impact of dumping the poorly prepared citizens of that socialist state into the competitive maelstrom of the western world. Unrestrained capitalism, of course, can be as frightful as all-out collectivist tyranny. As the historian Arthur Schlesinger wrote in 1947, when it had become abundantly clear that Stalinist Russia was not building Utopia for its people, "Industry and government are the basic events; they institutionalize the pride and the greed, the sadism and the masochism, the ecstasy in power and the ecstasy in submission, which are the abiding causes of the trouble of the world." It is necessary to temper one system with infusions of the other—government intervention correcting the abuses of all-out laissez-faire capitalism.

I know which system I prefer to live under. I will always opt for freedom and uncertainty over the security of a police state and a planned economy. But neither system is ideal; neither is perfect; one must constantly correct the excesses of the other.

Quite a trip, yes. ●

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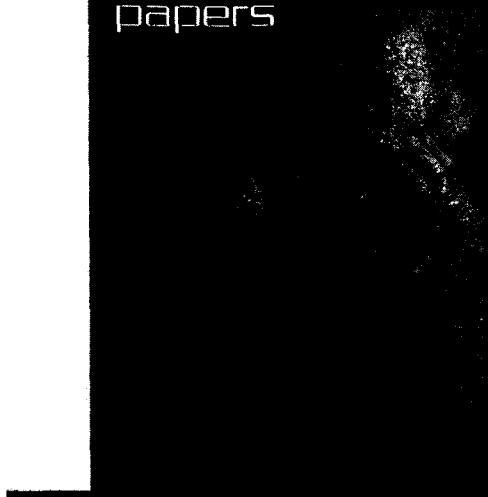
the enemy papers



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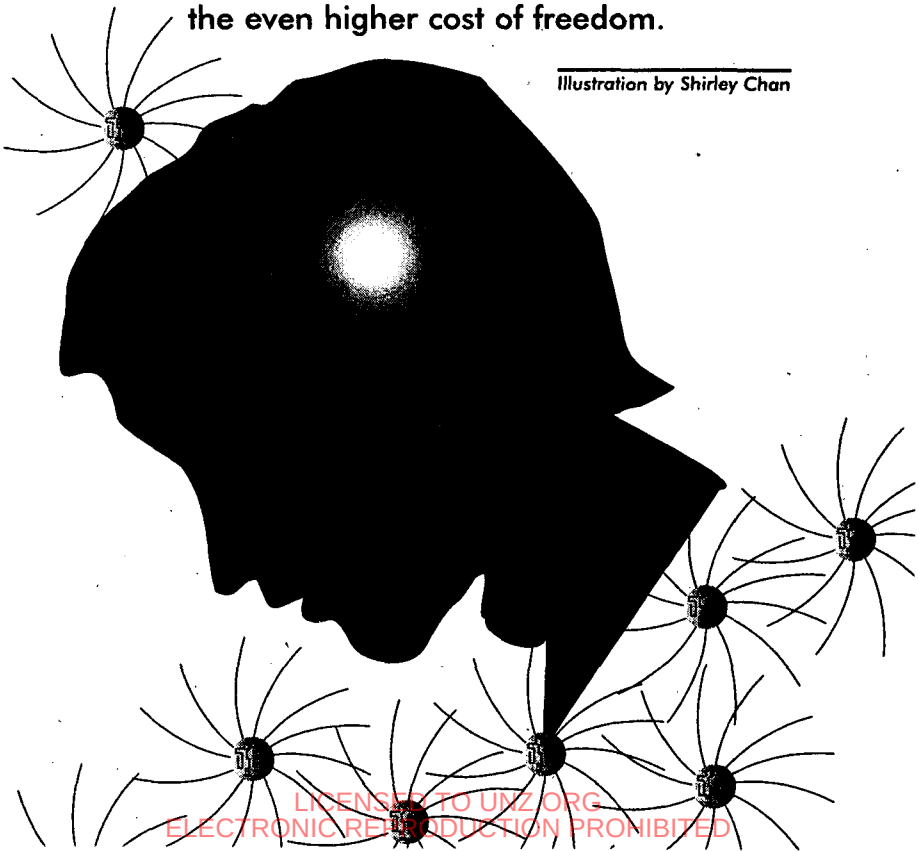
Michael Swanwick

WILD MINDS

Ever since finishing his acclaimed new novel, *Jack Faust* (Avon), Michael Swanwick has had an outpouring of short fiction. We've been lucky to be on the receiving end for most of these stories. In his latest tale, he reveals the high cost of serenity and the even higher cost of freedom.

Illustration by Shirley Chan



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I met her at a businesspersons' orgy in London. The room was in the back of a pub that was all brass and beveled glass, nostalgia and dark oak. The doorkeeper hesitated when it saw how many times I'd attended in the last month. But then I suggested it scroll up my travel schedule, and it saw that I wasn't acting out a sex-addiction script, but properly maintaining my forebrain and hindbrain balances. So it let me in.

Inside, the light was dimly textured and occasionally mirrored. Friendly hands helped me off with my clothing. "I'm Thom," I murmured, and "Annalouise . . . Enoch . . . Abdul . . . Magdalena . . . Claire," those nearest quietly replied. Time passed.

I noticed Hellene not because she was beautiful—who pays attention to beauty, after the first hour?—but because it took her so long to find release. By the time she was done, there was a whole new crowd; only she and I remained of all who had been in the room when I entered.

In the halfway room, we talked.

"My assemblers and sorters got into a hierarchic conflict," I told her. "Too many new faces, too many interchangeable cities."

She nodded. "I've been under a lot of stress myself. My neural mediator has become unreliable. And since I'm scheduled for an upgrade, it's not worth it running a purge. I had to off-line the mediator, and take the week off from work."

"What do you do?" I asked. I'd already spotted her as being optimized.

She worked in human resources, she said. When I heard that, I asked, "Is there any hope for people like me? Those who won't accept optimization, I mean."

"Wild minds?" Hellene looked thoughtful. "Five years ago I'd've said no, open-and-shut, end of story. Period. Zero rez. Today, though . . ."

"Yes?"

"I don't know," she said in an anguished voice. "I simply don't know."

I could sense something significant occurring within myself, intuit some emotional sea-change organizing itself deep on the unseen levels—the planners building new concept-language, the shunts and blocks being rearranged. Of course I had no way of knowing what it was. I hadn't been optimized. Still—

"Can I walk you home?" I asked.

She looked at me for a long and silent second. "I live in Prague."

"Oh."

"We could go to your place, if it's not too far."

We took the hypermetro to Glasgow. Got off at the Queen Street Station and walked up to my flat in Renfrew Street. We talked a little on the train, but Hellene fell silent when we hit the street.

They don't like the old places, the new people, cluttered with seedy

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pubs and street corner hang-outs, the niches where shabby men sit slumped over their whisky in paper bags, the balconies from which old women watch over the street. It unnerves them, this stench of accommodation and human dirt. It frightens them that it works so well, when it so obviously shouldn't. "You're a Catholic," she said.

She was looking at my icon, a molecular reproduction of Ad Reinhardt's "For T.M." It's one of his black paintings, his first, and modestly small. At first it seems unvaryingly colorless; you have to stare at it for some time to see the subtle differences in the black, the thick cross that quarters and dominates that small lightless universe. He painted it for Thomas Merton, who was a monk.

My copy is a duplicate as exact as human technology can make it; more exact than human perception can distinguish. I use it as a focus for meditation. Opposite it is a Charles Rennie MacIntosh chair, high-backed. An original because it was made to his directions. Sometimes I'll sit in the one and stare at the other, thinking about distinctions, authenticity, and duplicity.

"You wouldn't need meditation if you were optimized."

"No. But the Church considers it a mortal sin, you see."

"The Church can't possibly approve of your attending orgies."

"Oh. Well. It's winked at." I shrugged. "As long as you go to confession before you take Communion. . . ."

"What do you see when you meditate?"

"Sometimes I see comfort there; other times I see suffering."

"I don't like ambiguity. It's an artifact of the old world." She turned away from the picture. She had those chill Scandinavian features that don't show emotions well. She was beautiful, I realized with a mental start. And, almost at the same instant but twice as startling, I realized that she reminded me of Sophia.

Out of nowhere, without transition, Hellene said, "I must return to Prague. I haven't seen my children in two weeks."

"They'll be glad to see you."

"Glad? I doubt it. No more than I will be to see them," she said in the manner of one totally unable to lie to herself. "I've spun off three partials that they like considerably more than they do me. And I signed them up with Sterling International for full optimization when they were eight."

I said nothing.

"Do you think that makes me a bad mother?"

"I wanted children, too," I said. "But it didn't work out."

"You're evading the question."

I thought for a second. Then, because there was no way around it short of a lie, I said, "Yes. Yes, I do." And, "I'm going to put a kettle on. Would you like a cup?"

* * *

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My grandfather used to talk about the value of a good education. His generation was obsessed with the idea. But when the workings of the human brain were finally and completely understood—largely as a result of the NAFTA "virtual genome" project—mere learning became so easy that most corporations simply educated their workforce themselves to whatever standards were currently needed. Anybody could become a doctor, a lawyer, a physicist, provided they could spare the month it took to absorb the technical skills.

With knowledge so cheap, the only thing workers had to sell was their character: Their integrity, prudence, willingness to work, and hard-headed lack of sentiment. Which is when it was discovered that a dozen spiderweb-thin wires and a neural mediator the size of a pinhead would make anybody as disciplined and thrifty as they desired. Fifty cents' worth of materials and an hour on the operating table would render anybody eminently employable.

The ambitious latched onto optimization as if it were a kite string that could snatch them right up into the sky. Which, in practical terms, it was. Acquiring a neural mediator was as good as a Harvard degree used to be. And—because it was new, and most people were afraid of it—optimization created a new elite.

Sophia and I used to argue about this all the time. She wanted to climb that kite string right into the future. I pointed out that it was the road to excommunication. Which shows just what a hypocrite I was. Back then I was not at all a religious man. I didn't need the comfort of religion the way I do now.

But you take your arguments where you can get them. Wild minds don't know from rational discourse. They only care about winning. Sophia was the same. We yelled at each other for hour upon hour, evening after evening. Sometimes we broke things.

Hellene drank her tea unsweetened, with milk.

We talked through the night. Hellene, of course, didn't need sleep. Normally I did, but not tonight. Something was happening within me; I could feel my components buzzing and spinning. The secondary chemical effects were enough to keep me alert. Those, and the tea.

"You seem an intelligent enough man," she said at one point, and then, gesturing at the wooden floors and glass windows, added, "How can you live in such primitive squalor? Why reject what science has revealed about the workings of the brain?

"I have no complaints about the knowledge *per se*." I used to have a terrible temper. I was a violent, intemperate man. Or so it seems to me now. "Learning the structural basis of emotions, and how to master them before they flush the body with adrenaline, has been a great benefit to me."

"So why haven't you been optimized?"

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"I was afraid of losing myself."

"Self is an illusion. The single unified ego you mistake for your 'self' is just a fairy-tale that your assemblers, sorters, and functional transients tell each other."

"I know that. But still . . ."

She put her cup down. "Let me show you something."

From her purse she took out a box of old-fashioned wooden matches. She removed five, aligned them all together in a bundle, and then clenched them in her hand, sulfur side down, with just the tips of the wood ends sticking out.

"Control over involuntary functions, including localized body heat," she said.

There was a gout of flame between her fingers. She opened her hand. The matches were ablaze.

"The ability to block pain."

This wasn't a trick. I could smell her flesh burning.

When the matches had burned out, she dumped them in her saucer, and showed me the blackened skin where they had been. The flesh by its edges was red and puffy, already starting to blister.

"Accelerated regenerative ability."

For five minutes, she held her hand out, flat and steady. For five minutes, I watched. And at the end of that five minutes, it was pink and healed. Unblackened. Unblistered.

Hellene spooned sugar into her teacup, returning to the sugar bowl at least six times before she was done. She drank down the sweet, syrupy mess with a small moue of distaste. "These are only the crude physical manifestations of what optimization makes possible. Mentally—there are hardly the words. Absolute clarity of thought, even during emergencies. Freedom from prejudice and superstition. Freedom from the tyranny of emotion."

There was a smooth, practiced quality to her words. She'd said she was in human resources—now I knew she was a corporate recruiter. One salesman can always recognize another.

"Sometimes," I said carefully, "I enjoy my emotions."

"So do I—when I have them under control," Hellene said with a touch of asperity. "You mustn't judge the experience by a malfunctioning mediator."

"I don't."

"It would be like judging ecological restoration by the Sitnikov Tundra incident."

"Of course."

"Or seeing a junked suborbital and deciding that rocket flight was impossible."

"I understand completely."

Abruptly, Hellene burst into tears.

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"Oh God—no. Please," she said when I tried to hold her and comfort her. "It's just that I'm not used to functioning without the mediator, and so I get these damned emotional transients. All my chemical balances are out of whack."

"When will your new mediator be—?"

"Tuesday."

"Less than three days, then. That's not so bad."

"It wouldn't be, if I didn't need to see my children."

I waited while she got herself under control again. Then, because the question had been nagging at me for hours, I said, "I don't understand why you had children in the first place."

"Blame it on Berne. The Bureau des Normalisations et Habitudes was afraid that not enough people were signing up for optimization. It was discovered that optimized people weren't having children, so they crafted a regulation giving serious career preference to those who did."

"Why?"

"Because people like me are *necessary*. Do you have any idea how complicated the world has gotten? Unaugmented minds couldn't begin to run it. There'd be famines, wars . . ."

She was crying again. This time when I put my arms around her, she did not protest. Her face turned to bury itself in my shoulder. Her tears soaked a damp rectangle through my shirt. I could feel their moisture on my skin.

Holding her like that, stroking her infinitely fine hair, thinking of her austere face, those pale, pale eyes, I felt the shunts and blocks shifting within me. All my emotional components wheeled about the still instant, ready to collapse into a new paradigmatic state at the least provocation. The touch of a hand, the merest ghost of a smile, the right word. I could have fallen in love with her then and there.

Which is the price one pays for having a wild mind. You're constantly at the mercy of forces you don't fully understand. For the moment, I felt like a feral child standing on the twilight lands between the cultivated fields and the wolf-haunted forests, unable to choose between them.

Then, as quickly as it began, it was over. Hellene pushed herself away from me, once again in control of her emotions. "Let me show you something," she said. "Have you got home virtual?"

"I don't use it much."

She took a small device out of her purse. "This is an adapter for your set. Very simple, very safe. Give it a try."

"What does it do?"

"It's a prototype recruitment device, and it's intended for people like you. For the space of fifteen seconds, you'll know how it feels to be optimized. Just so you can see there's nothing to be afraid of."

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"Will it change me?"

"All experience changes you. But this is only a magnetic resonance simulacrum. When the show's over, the lights come up and the curtains go down. There you are in your seat, just as before."

"I'll do it," I said, "if you'll agree to try out something for me afterward."

Wordlessly, she handed me the adapter.

I put on the wraparounds. At my nod, Hellene flicked the switch. I sucked in my breath.

It was as if I had shrugged off an enormous burden. I felt myself straighten. My pulse strengthened and I breathed in deep, savoring the smells of my apartment; they were a symphony of minor and major keys, information that a second ago I had ignored or repressed. Wood polish and hair mousse. A hint of machine-oil from the robot floor-cleaner hiding under my bed, which only came out while I was away. Boiled cabbage from a hundred bachelor dinners. And underneath it all, near-microscopic traces of lilac soap and herbal shampoo, of *Ambrosie* and *Pas de Regret,* of ginger candies and Trinidadian rum, the olfactory ghost of Sophia that no amount of scrubbing could exorcise.

The visuals were minimal. I was standing in an empty room. Everything—windows, doorknob, floor, had been painted a uniform white. But mentally, the experience was wonderful. Like standing upon a mountain top facing into a thin, chill wind. Like diving naked into an ice-cold lake at dawn. I closed my eyes and savored the blessed clarity that filled my being.

For the first time in as long as I could remember, I felt just fine.

There were any number of mental exercises I could try out. The adapter presented me with a menu of them. But I dismissed it out of hand. Forget that nonsense.

I just wanted to stand there, not feeling guilty about Sophia. Not missing her. Not regretting a thing. I knew it wasn't my fault. Nothing was my fault, and if it *had* been, that wouldn't have bothered me either. If I'd been told that the entire human race would be killed five seconds after I died a natural death, I would've found it vaguely interesting, like something you see on a nature program. But it wouldn't have troubled me.

Then it was over.

For a long instant, I just sat there. All I could think was that if this thing had been around four years ago, Sophia would be here with me now. She'd never have chosen optimization knowing it would be like *that.* Then I took off the wraparounds.

Hellene was smiling. "Well?" she said. She just didn't get it.

"Now it's your turn to do something for me."

For a flicker of an instant, she looked disappointed. But it didn't last.

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"What is it?"

"It'll be morning soon," I said. "I want you to come to Mass with me."

Hellene looked at me as if I'd invited her to wallow in feces. Then she laughed. "Will I have to eat human flesh?"

It was like a breath of wind on a playing-card castle. All the emotional structures my assemblers had been putting together collapsed into nothingness. I didn't know whether I should be glad or sad. But I knew now that I would never—*could* never—love this woman.

Something of this must have showed in my expression, for Hellene quickly said, "Forgive me, that was unspeakably rude." One hand fluttered by the side of her skull. "I've grown so used to having a mediator that without it I simply blurt out whatever enters my head." She unplugged the adapter and put it back in her purse. "But I don't indulge in superstitions. Good God, what would be the point?"

"So you think religion is just a superstition?"

"It was the first thing to go, after I was optimized."

Sophia had said much the same thing, the day of her optimization. It was an outpatient operation, in by three, out by six, no more complicated than getting your kidneys regrown. So she was still working things out when she came home. By seven, she'd seen through God, prayer, and the Catholic Church. By eight, she had discarded her plans to have children, as well as a lifelong love of music. By nine, she'd outgrown me.

Hellene cocked her head to the side in that mannered little gesture optimized businesspeople use to let you know they've just accessed the time. "It's been lovely," she said. "Thank you, you've been so very kind. But now if you'll excuse me, I really must go. My children—"

"I understand."

"I face a severe fine if I don't see them at least twice a month. It's happened three times so far this year, and quite frankly, my bank account can't take it."

On the way out, Hellene noticed the portrait of Sophia by the door. "Your wife?" she asked.

"Yes."

"She's exquisite."

"Yes," I said. "She is." I didn't add that I'd killed her. Nor that a panel of neuroanalysts had found me innocent by virtue of a faulty transition function, and, after minor chemical adjustments and a two-day course on anger control techniques, had released me onto the street without prejudice.

Or hope.

That was when I discovered the consolation of religion. Catholics do not believe in faulty transition functions. According to the Church, I

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had *sinned*. I had sinned, and therefore I must repent, confess, and atone.

I performed an act of true contrition, and received absolution. God has forgiven me.

Mind you, I have not forgiven *myself*. Still, I have hope.

Which is why I'll never be optimized. The thought that a silicon-doped biochip could make me accept Sophia's death as an unfortunate accident of neurochemistry and nothing more, turns my stomach.

"Goodbye," I said.

Hellene waved a hand in the air without turning around. She disappeared in the direction of Queen Street Station. I shut the door.

From Hill Street, which runs the height of Glasgow's Old City, you can stand at an intersection and look down on one side upon Charing Cross and on the other upon Cowcaddens. The logic of the city is laid clear there, and although the buildings are largely Victorian (save for those areas cleared by enemy bombings in World War II, which are old modern), the logic is essentially medieval: The streets have grown as they will, in a rough sort of grid, and narrow enough that most are now fit for one-way traffic only.

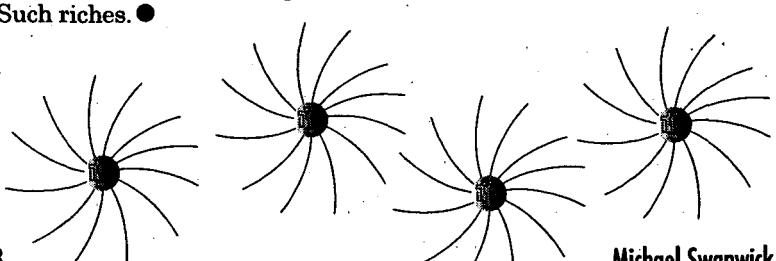
But if you look beyond Cowcaddens, the ruins of the M8 Motorway cut through the city, wide and out of scale, long unused but still fringed by derelict buildings, still blighting the neighborhoods it was meant to serve. A dead road, fringed by the dead flesh of abandoned buildings.

Beyond, by the horizon, were the shimmering planes and uncertain surfaces of the buildings where the new people lived, buildings that could never have been designed without mental optimization, all tensengricity and interactive film. I'd been in those bright and fast habitats. The air *sings* within their perfect corridors. Nobody could deny this.

Still, I preferred the terraces and too-narrow streets and obsolete people you find in the old city. The new people don't claim to be human, and I don't claim that being human is any longer essential. But I cling to the human condition anyway, out of nostalgia perhaps, but also, possibly, because it contains something of genuine value.

I sat in the straight-back Charles Rennie MacIntosh and stared at the icon. It was all there, if only I could comprehend it: the dark dimensions of the human mind. Such depths it holds!

Such riches. ●



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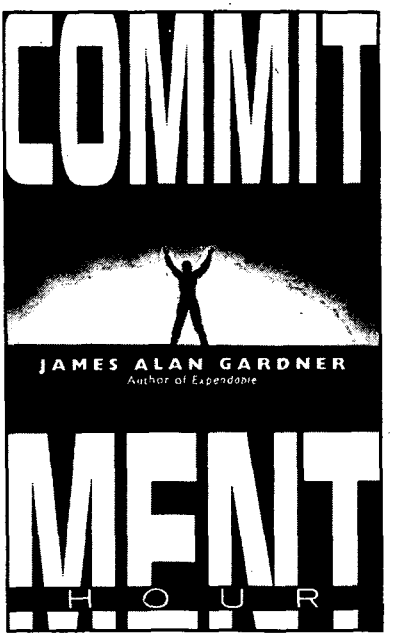
COMMITMENT HOUR
JAMES ALAN GARDNER



FROM
THE AUTHOR OF
EXPENDABLE
COMES A
SPELLBINDING
ADVENTURE
WHICH DARES TO
POSE CRITICAL
QUESTIONS
ABOUT THE HUMAN
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Kage Baker

LEMURIA *WILL* RISE!

Kage Baker's first novel, *In the Garden of Iden, a Novel of the Company*, has just been published by Harcourt Brace. Her next company book, *Sky Coyote*, will be out in early 1999. Regarding her latest tale, Ms. Baker says, "The Pismo Dunes really exist, and have in fact sheltered any number of mystical Celts, poets, reincarnated Lemurians, artists, freethinkers, and clam poachers." This entertaining story is the chronicle of another intriguing company adventure.

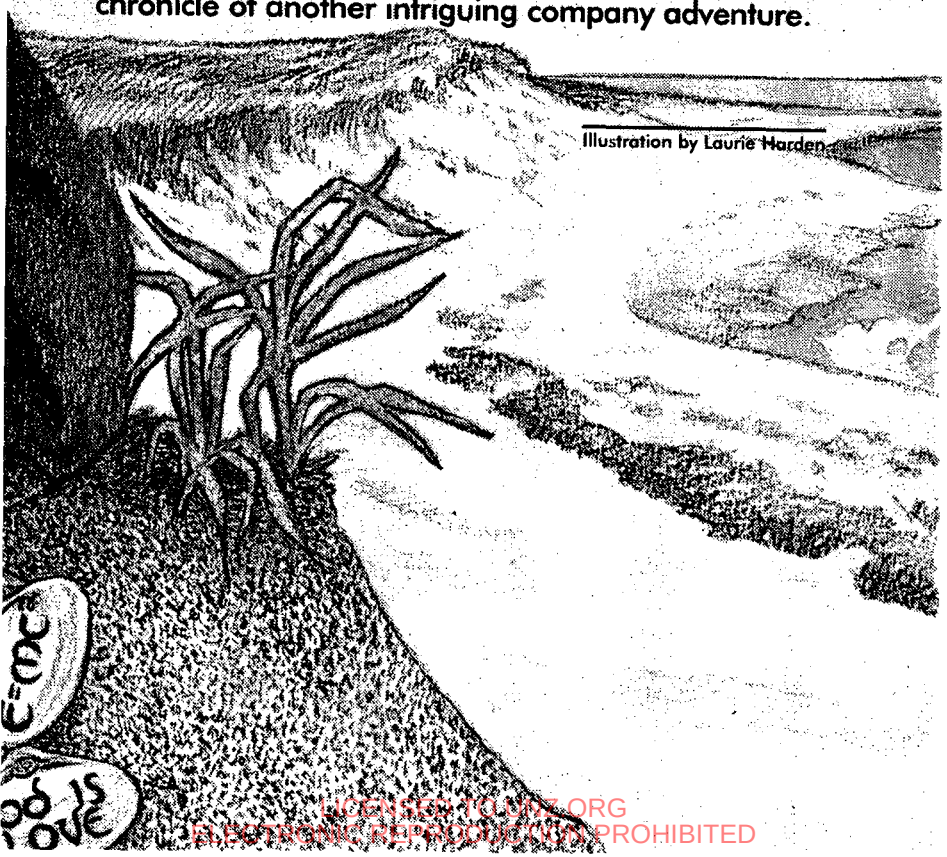

Illustration by Laurie Harden

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Somewhere God has a celestial Polaroid of me, standing there in the dunes with a painted clamshell in one hand and a sprig of *Oenothera hookeri* ssp. *sclatera* in the other, staring heavenward with a look of stupefied amazement. When He needs a mood lightener, He takes a look at that picture and laughs like hell.

It was 1860 and the Company had sent me to Pismo Beach. The place was not yet the vacation destination of Warner Brothers toons; the little town of cottages and motels wouldn't exist for another generation or two, but it did feature all the clams one could eat, and all the sand too.

I wasn't there for the clams, though.

If you stand on the beach at Pismo and look south, you can see twenty-odd miles of shore stretching away to Point Sal, endless lines of breakers foreshortened into little white scallops on blue water. The waves roll in on a wide pale beach toward a green line of cypress forest, rising on low sandhills to your left. Beyond them, and further south, rise the dunes.

You never saw anything so pure of line and color in your life, though the lines shift constantly and the color is an indefinable shade between ivory and pink, or possibly gold. Even on a grey day they glow with their own light, pulsing as cloud shadows flow across them.

Beautiful, though I couldn't see how anything could be growing out there; and yet this was where I was supposed to find a rare variant of Evening Primrose.

Everywhere else in California, *Oenothera hookerii* is a lemon-yellow flower. In 1859, however, a salmon-pink subspecies was reported, growing only in a certain place in these very dunes, and a single sample collected and preserved. Now, Evening Primrose Oil from the yellow flower has a number of recognized medical uses, such as being the only substance known to help sufferers of Laurent's Syndrome, that terrible cripppler of the twenty-first century. Thanks to a unique and complex protein, it helps retard the decay of those oh-so-important genito-urinary nerve sheaths afflicted by Laurent's. Analysis of the only surviving sample of the pink variety showed it to have had an even *more* unique and complex protein, which would probably *stop* the decay of the nerve sheaths entirely, bringing bliss and continence to those suffering from the syndrome.

Unfortunately for them, it will be extinct by their time, long since destroyed by the ravages of the offroad vehicles of the twentieth century. Interestingly enough, Laurent's Syndrome and its attendant neurovascular damage occurs most frequently in people who spend a lot of time with their reproductive organs suspended over internal combustion engines—such as the ones that power dune bikes. Mother Nature giving a rousing one-fingered salute to offroad enthusiasts, I suppose.

Not my job to judge—I was only there to gather samples, test them for the suspected properties, and (if they tested positive) secure live plants

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for the greenhouses of my Company, Dr. Zeus Inc. Dr. Zeus operates out of the twenty-fourth century and makes a pretty penny, let me tell you, out of miracle medical cures obtained by time travel.

So I shouldered my pack, settled my hat more firmly on my head and set off down the beach, keeping to the hard-packed sand and splashing through the surf occasionally. There were clams just below the surface of the sand, massed thick as cobblestones. They were big, too, and beautifully danger-free: no sewers yet dumping *E. coli*, no cracked pipes leaking petroleum surfactant, no nuclear power plants cooking the seawater. In fact there weren't even any railroads through here, this early, and precious few people.

My spirits rose as I strode on, past future real estate fantasies with quaint Yankee names like Grover City, Oceano, La Grande: mile after mile of perfect beach and not a mortal soul in sight. I'd build a driftwood fire, that was what I'd do, and have a private clambake. I had a flask of tequila in my pack, too. Why couldn't all my jobs be like this? No tiresome mortals to negotiate with, no dismal muddy cities, no noise, no trouble.

I turned inland at the designated coordinates and walked back into the dunes. Squinting against the golden glow, I almost reached for my green spectacles; then paused, grinning to myself. Nobody here to see, was there? No mortals to be terrified by my appearance if I simply let the polarized lenses on my eyes darken. Whistling, I trudged onward, a cyborg with a sun hat and camping gear.

I found, as I moved further in, that this was no desert at all. There were islands in this maze of glowing sand, cool green coves of willow and beach myrtle and wild blackberry. There were a few little freshwater lakes sparkling, green reeds waving, ducks paddling around; there were abundant wildflowers too, especially rangy stands of yellow Evening Primrose. Somewhere hereabouts must be my quarry.

Climbing to the top of a dune I spotted it, on visual alone, a mere thirty meters south-southwest: a thicket of willow on three sides around a lawn of coarse dune grass, and all along the edge the tall woody stems bearing trumpet flowers of flaming pink! Could my work get any easier? I was actually singing as I plowed on down the side of the dune, an old old song from a long way away.

So I made a little paradise of a base camp on the lawn, with a tent for my field lab and a sleeping bivvy, and got a specimen straight into solution for analysis. But even as I bustled happily about, I was becoming aware of Something that pulled at one of my lower levels of perception. You wouldn't have heard the subsonic tone, or noticed the faint flash of a color best described as blue; you *might* just possibly have felt the faint tingling sensation, but only if you were a very unusual mortal indeed. Reluctantly I crawled out of the lab and stood, turning my head from side to side, scanning.

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Anomaly, five kilometers due north, electromagnetic. And . . . Crome's Radiation. And . . . a mortal human being. So much for my splendid isolation. How very tedious; now I'd have to investigate the damned thing. Sighing, I pulled out my green glasses and put them on.

I slogged up one dune and down another, following the signals through a landscape where one expected Rudolph Valentino to ride into view at any moment, burnoose flapping. God knows he would have looked commonplace enough, compared with what met my eyes when I got to the top of the last high dune, staggering slightly.

In the valley below me was another green cove, with its own dense willow thicket and its own green lawn. But rising from the thicket on four cottonwood poles was a thing like a big beehive or an Irish monk's cell, woven of peeled willow wands. On its domed top it wore a sort of cap of tight-braided eelgrass; a mat of the same flapped before a hole near its base. A path had been worn across the lawn, neatly outlined with clam shells arranged in a pattern. Real beehives were ranged in a tidy row there, woven skeps like miniatures of the house. All along the perimeter of the lawn, and poking up here and there out of the willows, were fantastical figures carved of driftwood, elaborately decorated with mussel shells and feathers. I saw Celtic crosses and sun wheels, I saw leaping horses, I saw stiff and stylized warriors with shields, I saw grass-skirted women of remarkable attributes.

Strange, but not so strange as the mottoes and exhortations spelled out in clam shells on the face of every surrounding dune. The nearest one said GOD IS LOVE. *DO NO HARM*, REMEMBER, *NOT ALONE*, COME TOGETHER, and *LEMURIA HERE* shouted from dunes in the nearer distance. Further off still rose the white shell domes of prehistoric middens.

Staring down, I collapsed into a sitting position on the sand. Borne faintly up on the wind and the blue streaming spirals of Crome's Radiation were the plaintive scrapings of a fiddle.

Well, what do you know? A holy hermit, apparently; judging from the Crome Effect, one of those poor mortals who would one day be classed as "psychic." The radiation from this one was so intense his abilities had probably driven him crazy, so he must have fled human society and somehow wound up here in the dunes. Mystery explained. I allowed myself a smile.

The electromagnetic anomaly was still unaccounted for, however . . . I scowled and turned my head, scanning. Now it seemed unclear, diffuse, further away. Now it faded out. Strange.

The fiddle music stopped. The Crome waves intensified a moment, and then the beehive shook slightly as the center mat was pushed aside. A snow-white beard flowed out, followed by the wrinkled and bespectacled face to which it was attached. The hermit turned to look straight at me, though I had been sitting perfectly motionless out of his line of sight.

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"Did yez wish a word with me, then?" asked the hermit.

I blinked. Foolish to be surprised, though, with all the other weirdness here. "I was only admiring your, uh, art," I replied. "It wasn't my intention to disturb you."

We regarded each other for a moment. He wrinkled his brow.

"Have They sent yez to console me fleshly lusts?" he inquired.

Gosh, how sweet. "No," I answered.

"Dat's good, then." He relaxed. "They're always parading them foreign beauties before my eyes and that last one was more than a man of my years can do justice to, to tell yez the truth of it. Yez'll excuse me a moment, pray."

He vanished back into the beehive, and it shook and creaked with his rustling around in there. I wondered if I should disappear and decided against doing so; he might go looking for me, and I'd just as soon he didn't find my camp. Besides, I was curious. What was a Celtic anchorite doing in California, let alone in the vicinity of Pismo Beach?

So I waited, and after a moment he emerged from the beehive and dropped into the willows below, and came across his lawn toward me. I got up and descended the side of the dune to meet him, scanning him as I went. When we got within four meters of one another we both stopped abruptly. *He* was scanning *me*, albeit in a very unfocussed and inefficient way.

I don't know what he perceived, but I saw a tiny elderly mortal whose body glowed and flashed with a surrounding halo of blue radiation. He wore a sealskin loincloth and a kind of tabard of woven eelgrass to which had been sewn thousands of seagull feathers, tiny white ones. His ancient spectacles were tied on with string. Apart from advanced age he was in excellent health, without so much as an infected tooth.

He peered at me suspiciously, cocking his head.

"Yez ain't from Them," he stated.

"No," I admitted. "Who are They?"

"Why, the Ascended Masters," he answered, as though I were crazy to ask. "Them fellows up on Mount Shasta, ye know. The Inheritors of Lemuria."

O-kay. "No, I haven't heard of them, Señor, I 'm only from Monterey," I replied cautiously. "My name is Dolores Concepción Mendoza, and I have come here on holiday to sketch wildflowers."

"O, I don't know about that." He looked me up and down. "Yez got a look about yez of the Deathless Ones."

Whoops. So much for keeping a cover identity around a psychic. I thought fast, which is to say I accessed Smith's *History of Mystical Esoteric Cults,* Volumes 1-10; blinked, smiled, and said: "The White Fraternity does not reveal itself to all men. You are to be commended on your sharp sight, Brother. But I have come here, as I said, for the wild flowers

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that grow here in these dunes, to collect them for their rare properties. Look into my heart and you will see that I speak the truth."

He scanned me a moment and nodded. "So, dat's all right. Yez ain't of any Order I ever seen though. What Discipline do yez follow?"

"The Mystical Sisterhood of Orion," I improvised. "We, uh, live in caves in the Pyrenees and observe absolute chastity. We also preserve the healing arts of the exiled Moors. A traveler brought us word of the rare flowers here, and I have been sent to collect them for our studies."

"Well!" The anchorite's thin chest swelled with pride. "Yez couldn't have come to a more salubrious place for medicines. These dunes is the best place for the corporeal body yez ever saw. How long d'yez think I've lived here, without ever a day of sickness or care? Forty years, I tell yez, forty years since the *Lima* run aground out there and I come ashore. And in all that time, not one pain nor pang. It's the superior vibrations, ye know."

"I don't doubt it," I affirmed solemnly.

"The most powerful vibrations in the world, right here in these dunes, and I have that straight from the Ascended Masters Themselves. Why, They come here all the time to enjoy the beneficial vibrational effects." He nodded with certainty.

"Really?" I wondered when he was going to ask if I had a piece of cheese about me. "They come here often, do They?"

"Indeed They do. I'll introduce yez, maybe."

"That would be charming, though I'm sure They're quite busy. Still, I hope you'll give Them my best regards." I made to withdraw. "And now, Señor, I must set about my appointed task. Good day." Poor old lunatic.

He bid me an effusive farewell and I climbed away across the sand, giggling to myself. Well, this was one for the cultural anthropologists: a classic California crackpot, years and years before the breed was supposed to be common here. Worth an amusing sidebar on my official report, perhaps.

I put him out of my mind and went back to my field lab, where I had a good afternoon's work undisturbed by weird lights or electromagnetic pulses. Not that there weren't plenty of both, but now that I knew their origin I could afford to ignore them, couldn't I? And ignore them I did, though blue lightning came down and danced at the water's edge as I dug clams for my supper, and blue aurorae shimmered over my driftwood fire as I sipped tequila. When the level in the flask grew low enough I took to singing old Gypsy songs at them. I thought I sounded like a wounded coyote, but the blue lights seemed to like it. They followed me back to my bivvy and flitted off politely when I crawled in to sleep.

"I thought I'd bring yez a few clams for breakfast, there," sounded a voice close to my ear, as a net bag clattered down before my face. I managed to avoid erupting through the roof of my bivvy and scrambled out on

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knees and elbows instead. The hermit was inspecting my field lab with great interest.

"Ain't dat fascinatin', now?" He held a glass slide up to the light and peered through it. "The Sisterhood's got all the latest appurtenances, I can see dat."

"Yes." I got hastily to my feet. "And thank you so very much for the clams, Señor, how gracious of you; may I offer you a cup of coffee?" Not much danger in a security breach where a looney was involved, but he might break something.

"Coffee." With a wistful smile he handed me back my slide. "My, I ain't had coffee since the *Lima*. 'Course it's bad for yez, ye know, or so They tell me. All them alkaloids."

How'd he know that? Maybe he'd been a chemist before he'd gone to sea. "Er—we of the Sisterhood can neutralize all toxins before they harm our, uh, atomic structures," I told him. Well, it wasn't exactly a lie.

He looked impressed. "Dat's a fine trick, to be sure. The Ascended Masters can do that one, but I can't, ye know, not till I've made me transition to the next Astral Plane. Got any tea?"

With a growing sense of unreality I set up my camp stove and prepared his tea and my badly needed coffee. He watched alertly, commenting with little enthusiastic cries and noddings of his head on all the advanced technological marvels I employed.

Having received his tea, the hermit leaned back comfortably into a hill of sand and regarded me over the steaming cup.

"Now I wonder," he said, "whether the Sisterhood is up on interpreting the Ancient Prophecies, too?"

"No, actually, Señor." I sipped coffee very carefully. I have some circuitry close to my eustachian tubes that registers intense pain if exposed to too-hot liquids. "We concentrate on the healing arts."

"The reason I was asking being," he continued, as though I hadn't spoken, "dat I need to get a fix on how much time I've got before Lemuria rises again."

Lemuria? I did a fast access. "Ah. You mean the legendary drowned continent, the Atlantis of the Pacific," I said.

"*Older* than Atlantis," he said firmly. "Them Atlanteans was no more than colonists of Lemuria, if yez want the truth of it. It was the cook on board the *Northerly Isles* first told me about Lemuria; he was a man with an education, ye know, before them unfortunate circumstances what sent him to sea. I'm telling you, the Lemurians had it over Atlantis in every way. Their high priests knew more arcane lore, their temples and palaces was bigger, and they sunk first."

"Really."

"They did. And see, the Atlanteans (who had got degenerate to start with, which was why they sunk) spread out all over everywhere and for-

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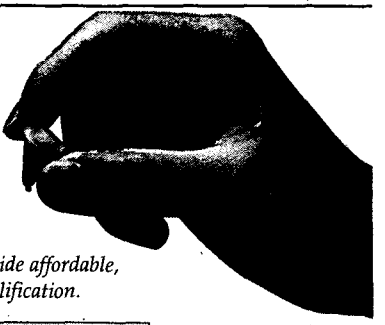
TECHNOLOGY UPDATE

One scientist's vision revolutionizes the hearing industry, benefiting millions of people...



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got their ancient wisdom, but not the Lemurians. They founded a fine city up on Mount Shasta, and from there They've kept Their gold and silver vessels together and Their ancient libraries and all."

"You don't say."

"I do. And I wager the reason They've been so careful to keep to Themselves *is*," he leaned forward for emphasis, "dat They know Lemuria's going to rise again, any day now, and They want to be able to move back in without the place getting crowded. Just a select company, ye know. They ain't said it in so many words—They're shy that way—but I can tell, all right."

"Mm-hm." I tasted my coffee. "And you need to know exactly when Lemuria will rise? Why don't you ask Them, Señor?"

"O, I have." He wrootched uneasily in the sand, causing little avalanches around himself. "But They don't care to talk about Lemuria much, which is a prudent thing to do, right enough, I can see dat; but, see, I've got this school to found, and if I know the vast submerged peaks ain't going to lift clear of the waves for another year or so, why then I've got time to get everything ready. On the other hand, if it's the day after tomorrow-like dat the ancient palaces is rising into view again, I'm in a sad fix."

"You're founding a school?" Who did he think was going to attend, clams? "What kind of school, Señor?"

"The School of Lemurian Knowledge." He put his finger to the side of his nose. "Now, it was foretold in me natal horoscope dat I was to found a great institution of learning. And, me being wrecked here, yez wouldn't think dat would come to pass, would yez, now? But Destiny's a mighty thing. It was here I met Them, and They saw at once I was spiritually evolved enough to keep company with the likes of Them. Mind you, it was a while before They'd admit to being the Ascended Masters—made out at first like what They didn't understand me—but at last They saw I was clever enough to have found out Their game. They put me through a lot of tests to see if I'm worthy, and They has prepared me ever since to be one of the Elect what'll get to live in Lemuria once it's up again. Why, They've had me to visit up there, ye know, I've walked in Their golden tunnels on Mount Shasta!

"But, after all, I pity me fellow creatures dat'll have to stay here and ain't had the benefit of Their company. So what I been doing is, I been copying down all I seen when I visits Them on sacred tablets, which is to form the library of me school. As soon as I've got all the collected wisdom down, pupils will flock to the dunes from all over the world. So, see, even if I ascend to Lemuria, or row out to it, or something, I can still pass on Their knowledge to mankind."

"So you see yourself as a sort of Promethean benefactor, then," I said straight-faced, taking a cautious drink from my cup. He drank too and then looked up as the classical allusion sank in.

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"Mind yez, I ain't stealing any sacred fire from Heaven!" he protested. "They're good fellows, Them Ascended Masters, and I'm sure They wouldn't mind about me copying things I've seen on sacred tablets, if I'd got around to mentioning 'em to Them. But I've been so busy, what with Them always testing me worthiness and all. . . ."

"No, no, of course." I looked around at the shifting sand. "But, tell me, what do you do for your tablets? There is no stone here."

"Clam shells," he told me. "I paint on the insides, see."

I looked at the net bag, lying where he'd dropped it. I wasn't quite up to breakfast yet. "Can you get a lot of sacred wisdom in a clamshell?"

"Yez can if yez paint small; but then dat's another way these dunes has it over other places, for there's much bigger clams here. If I had to use them little rubbishy eastern clams I'd have no end of labor." He shook his head.

"Good point." There was sand in the bottom of my cup. I tilted it and dumped the last few drops out. "Well, Señor—I wish I could be of some assistance to you in your generous efforts to spread enlightenment. Though I must say most arcane texts I've read hold the opinion that Lemuria won't rise before the end of this century, so I think you have plenty of time."

"Do yez tell me so?" He knit his white brows uncertainly. "All the omens I been seeing predict a great change dat's coming."

Well, there was the Civil War of the Yankees about to kick off, not that he'd be likely to hear much about it out here. I looked thoughtful and said, "I too have heard of a great disturbance in the affairs of men soon, but most prophets agree it will not last long. Surely, then, they don't mean the rise of Lemuria?"

"O, no, I suppose not," he agreed, draining his teacup. "For when Lemuria escapes Ocean's mighty bosom, its next great cycle will last seventeen million years, ye know."

It took nearly that long to get him to leave, with gentle hints and tactful shoves; but at last he vanished over the top of a dune, waving cheerfully, and I was able to relax in blessed silence.

And without mortal distractions I got so much work done that day, hangover notwithstanding, that by nightfall I was able to transmit preliminary results on my field credenza to the relay station on the nearby mesa. Things were looking good for Laurent's sufferers everywhere. With the cellular map and the holoes I included the following smirky communication:

SPECIAL NOTE: AUTHENTIC HOLY MAN LIVING IN DUNE REGION! ELDERLY MALE CAUCASIAN EUROPEAN ORIGIN, SPONTANEOUS CROME GENERATOR ESTIMATE FORCE 10. CLAIMS TO HAVE BEEN CONTACTED BY ANCIENT LEMURIAN MASTERS AND IS CONFIDENTLY WAITING FOR SUBMERGED CONTINENT

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TO RISE. IS COMPILING LIBRARY OF TEACHINGS OF ASCENDED MASTERS! GREAT SCHOOL OF PHILOSOPHY TO OPEN HERE ANY DAY NOW!

I signed off, crawled out of the tent and stood stretching, looking up at the stars. All the black heaven sparkled and shone, and the Milky Way streamed out to sea like smoke from a ship's funnel. Too nice a night to waste on sleep. I strolled off across the sand, following the sound of the night ocean.

Cresting the top of a dune unmarked by any print, I looked down on the white circle of a shell midden. It gleamed under the starlight, perfect in its circumference. How many generations of Chumash had picnicked here, before the Europeans came? The thing must be fifteen meters across.

"But it wasn't the Indians put it there, ye know," observed a voice at my elbow.

I screamed, leaped into thin air and reappeared on the other side of the midden. Heart pounding, I stared across at the hermit, who was standing where I had been a second before. He waved pleasantly, apparently quite unsurprised by my teleportation.

"It was Them," he called to me.

"What?" I gasped. *What was wrong with my Approach Warning Sensors?* I ran a hasty self-diagnostic.

"They put it there, as a marker for when They come sailing down from Mount Shasta to visit. Helps 'em navigate in," he explained. He strode down the dune across the sand to me, sturdy knees and elbows pumping. I watched him in disbelief.

"Out for a breath of fresh air, are yez?" he inquired. "I come out meself, on fine nights. These dunes is also the best place to watch the celestial movements, ye know."

"No city lights to dim the stars," I found myself remarking.

"There are not," he agreed, looking heavenward. A green firedrake crackled down the southern horizon. "Almost a pity that Lemuria's coming up so close by. They had towers in Their grand cities for the spreading of light focused through jewels. All them emeralds and rubies and sapphires winkin' away must have been a rare sight, and lit up the streets a deal better than lanterns, wouldn't ye think? But very bright."

"I suppose it would have been. Look, you don't think Lemuria's going to rise with the buildings all intact and everything in working order, do you? I mean, how long has it been at the bottom of the sea, for heaven's sake?" I cried in exasperation.

"Twelve million years," he informed me imperturbably.

"Well, there, how could there even be any ruins left after all this time?" I drew a deep breath, attempting to get a grip. The electromagnetic weirdness must be affecting me somehow. "It'll just be one big muddy unimproved . . . landmass."

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"So was San Francisco," he pointed out. "Nothing to speak of when the *Lima* put in there, and look what the Americans has built there now. I hear it's fit to rival Paris or London, though of course it's nothing so grand as what *They'll* build once They've got Their own back. Think of all them water frontage lots! And building's no trouble at all for Them, ye know, because They've got the secret of countermanding the forces of gravity."

"They have?"

"They have that. They've got a device uses cosmic rays to move great blocks of stone. Just floats 'em in as though they weighed nothing at all, at all. I daresay Their builders taught the Egyptians everything they knew. Why, the Pyramids ain't nothing to what you'll see being put up once Lemuria rises." He nodded in the direction of the sea as though he could glimpse it there already. My eyes followed his gaze involuntarily. I shook my head, as if to clear away the fog of mystical nonsense surrounding me.

"What a fascinating thought," I said, summoning every ounce of courtesy. "I have no doubt I shall dream about Lemuria's jewel-studded towers as I sleep. To which end, Señor, I must wish you Good Evening."

"And a fine Good Evening to yez as well. I think I'll just wait around and see if They drop by tonight. Yez'll be welcome to stay to meet Them, ye know." He raised his eyebrows alluringly.

"Thank you, Señor, but I am weary and fear I would not be at my social best. Give Them my regards, though, won't you?" I requested, and made my escape under the grinning stars.

When I returned to my camp there was a faint blue light blinking in my field lab. I actually grabbed up my frying pan and started for it, blood in my eye; but it was only the credenza indicator light, telling me that a transmission had come in while I was out.

I leaned down to peer at the tiny glowing screen.

PRIORITY DIRECTIVE GREEN 07011860 2300 RE: CROME GENERATOR. INVESTIGATE FURTHER. OBTAIN DNA SAMPLE AND FORWARD TO RELAY STATION.

There was some ugly language used in the field lab, and a frying pan sailed out under the stars as though propelled by cosmic anti-gravity rays.

So, how do you get a DNA sample from a psychic?

A real two-fisted operative would move in silently, plant some expensive neuroneutralizing device (which field botanists are never given enough budget for, by the way) and get a pint of blood and maybe a finger or two from the unconscious subject.

I opted to sneak into the hermit's house while he wasn't there and collect shed hair and skin cells, but even that presented its own problems.

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When did he leave his wicker beehive? For how long? Did he ever go far enough away for all his blue lights to follow him and leave me the hell alone? If he did, and they did, maybe he'd be unable to perceive my rifling his belongings.

Dawn of the next day found me crouching in a willow thicket one kilometer south of the hermit's cove, scanning intently. He was home, I could tell, awake already and moving around within a tiny zone of activity; must be still within the beehive. Abruptly his signal dropped in location and its zone widened: he'd climbed out and was moving around on his lawn. Then his signal moved away due west, receding and receding. He must be going down to dig clams. That should take him a while.

I emerged from my thicket and ran like a rabbit over the dunes. In no time I went tumbling down the sand-wall into his cove and sprinted across his lawn. Well, he wouldn't need any sixth sense to know I'd been here; I could always tell him I'd just stopped by to borrow a cup of sugar or something. No blue radiation at the moment, at least.

I pushed my way into the willows about the base of his beehive and looked around.

He'd cleared a space under the bushes around the four supporting poles. It was cool and shady in there, and clearly he used it as additional living room. Over to one side was a shallow well and the banked embers of a cooking fire; over to the other side must be his library, to judge from the baskets and baskets of clamshells. There must have been hundreds of them, each one painted with knotted and interlacing patterns of dizzying Celtic complexity. Some had text, beautiful tiny lettering massed between spirals and vine leaves, but many appeared to be abstract images. There was something vaguely familiar about them, but I couldn't spare the time to look further. I scrambled up his ladder and crawled into the beehive.

Right at the doorway was his scriptorium: a chunk of redwood log two feet across, adzed flat for a work surface, with clamshells holding various inks and paints. I supposed he made them from berry juice and powdered earths. A grooved tray held little brushes made from reed cane and hair; an old graniteware cup held water. The present tome in progress was balanced on a ring of woven grass.

I didn't look at it particularly closely, or at the fiddle hanging on the wall. I made straight for the rumpled mass of sealskins that formed the old man's bed.

I swept a few long white hairs into my collector and groped around with a scraper for skin cells. Oh, great: the ancient hide was coming off too. Now the Company would think he had seal DNA.

It would have to do. Tucking the samples away, I turned to exit on my hands and knees. My gaze fell on the half-painted clamshell.

The pattern was drawn in a faint silver line, done with a knife point or

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an old nail maybe, and blocked in carefully in ocher and olive green. Ribbons and dots? No. A twisting ladder? No . . . a DNA spiral.

A DNA spiral.

I stared at it fixedly for a long moment and then jumped down the ladder into the area below, where I grabbed up a clamshell from the nearest basket.

On its inner surface was an accurate depiction of the solar system, including Pluto and all the moons of Jupiter. And here was another one showing the coastline of Antarctica, and I couldn't identify this one but it certainly looked like circuitry designs. And what were these? Lenticular cumuli? *Where had he seen all this?*

He hadn't gotten it from any bloody Lemurians, that much I was sure of. In this time period, surely only one of Us could have painted these pictures, unless there was a serious security breach somewhere. I'd have to inform the Company.

I reflected on the possibilities as I sped back to my camp. He'd seen my field lab, of course, but I'd only been here a couple of days! He was a psychic, and a powerful one. Had he somehow been picking up transmissions from the station on the mesa nearby? If they'd been careless with their shielding, he might. Anyway it couldn't be my fault.

I rushed right into the tent and sent a breathless communication outlining what I'd found. As the last green letter flitted away into the ether, I sat back and frowned. Having been put into words, the story sounded even crazier than it was. The crew at the relay station might think I had a screw missing. Maybe I should go back and take some holoes of the clamshells to back up my story. There was still the DNA sample to send, too.

But even as I was preparing it for transmission, the credenza beeped and another message came in. I leaned over to peer at it.

PRIORITY DIRECTIVE GREEN 070218601100 RE: CROME GENERATOR. OBTAIN LIBRARY.

My jaw dropped. Hesitantly I transmitted: *CLARIFY? SPECIFY? HOW MANY?*

ENTIRE LIBRARY. OBTAIN. PRIORITY.

A long moment later I transmitted ACKNOWLEDGED.

Well, this was just great. What was I supposed to do now? Carry basket after basket of clamshells up to the relay station on the mesa?

Yes, that was exactly what I was supposed to do, and that was the easy part. How was I to obtain the old man's library in the first place? I'd like to see anybody just sort of slip four hundred pounds of clamshells into her pocket without being noticed, and I was dealing with a psychic at that.

I crawled out of the tent and stood, gloomily staring at the thickets of *Oenothera*. It wasn't as though I didn't have work of my own to do, after all. Look at all these endangered plants. And such specimens of *Lupinus*

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chamissonis, Fragaria chiloensis, Calystegia soldanella! Why couldn't the Company send a Security operative to deal with this? I reached out and broke off a sprig of primrose, examining closely the pattern of viral striping in a deeper pink than the salmon color of the petals. . . .

The petals turned blue. Everything turned blue: my hand, my sleeve, the dune before me. I raised a startled face just in time to see a dark-blue blur cross the sky above me, as the electromagnetic anomaly pulsed and roared like a monster leaping out of the sand at my feet. I tried to yell, but couldn't remember how; and I fell down a tiny blue tunnel where there was nothing to see but a line of tiny letters and punctuation marks, tangling themselves together in a vain attempt to produce something other than gibberish.

After a long while they did manage to spell out a word, however, and it blinked on and off steadily. RESET. Oh. I knew what that meant. I was supposed to do something now, wasn't I? I breathed, blinked, and tried to look around but found I could only move my eyes.

I lay where I had toppled backward, frozen in my last conscious attitude, arm still out, hand still clutching a sprig of *Oenothera*. A little sand had drifted into my open mouth. It was quiet and peaceful here now, and no longer blue; but the air stung with ozone and some sort of electromagnetic commotion was going on to the north of me.

To hell with it. I closed my eyes, but to my dismay saw red letters flashing behind my eyelids. PRIORITY! OBTAIN LIBRARY! My body jerked as some fried circuit repaired itself and my legs flexed, attempting to pull me up into a standing position. After several tries, during which the rigid upper half of my body jolted to and fro and got me another faceful of sand, my legs righted themselves and set off northward, staggering through the dunes. The rest of me rode along above them like an unwilling maharani atop a drunken elephant. At least some of the sand spilled out of my mouth.

As I lurched nearer I could feel the anomaly throbbing away up ahead, and a fan of blue rays spread themselves like a peacock's tail above the hermit's cove. Every instinct I had left was screaming at me to get out of there, but my lower torso blundered along like a goddam Frankenstein's Monster, stumbling occasionally and pitching me face-forward into the sand again. Frantically I went into my self-repair program and tried to get control, but it was committed to fixing my arms and would not allow override. The best I was able to do was close my mouth.

By the time I came thrashing over the top of the last dune, I had sensation again in my right arm; but what I beheld in the cove below me nearly brought on another fit of electronic apoplexy. Somebody else was stealing the library!

Two small figures were struggling up the face of the opposite dune, carrying each a basket of piled shells. From the prints in the sand ahead of

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them, I could see that this was not their first trip, and their destination was an indistinct domed something that lay in a shimmer of blue just over the top of the dune.

My jaw worked, I spat out sand and shouted, "Hey!" They turned around and I had the impression that they were a pair of English children in white hooded snowsuits, their facial features tiny and perfect, their skin ashy pale. They wore enormous black goggles. When they saw me they squeaked in horror and ran, plowing up the dune face in their efforts to get away from me and not drop the heavy baskets.

My legs took me down the sand like a juggernaut. I picked up speed across the lawn and started up after them, gaining back more and more of my coordination as I went. They were nearly to the top of the dune now and I could see there was something not quite human in their proportions. Head circumference too big, tubby little bodies, spindly arms and legs. What the Hell? I searched my index for information on related subjects and was rewarded with a host of terribly earnest UFO titles from the late twentieth century, all illustrated with drawings of these same spindly little people. *Aliens?* From outer space? Were *these* the Ascended Masters from whom the Hermit had been stealing his sacred fire, his memorized scraps of improbable knowledge? As I gained on them they began crying openmouthed in their terror, desperately trying to clamber over the top of the dune.

One of them made it but the other stumbled, dropping his basket, and a single clamshell bounced out and went skating down the sand wall toward me. My right hand shot out and closed on it like a trap, in as fine an example of bonehead priority programming as I've ever seen, because if I'd been able to ignore it and keep going past I'd have caught the little so-and-so. As it was, in my wasted second he managed to grab up his basket again and hands-and-knees drag it over the top, where his friend had hung back long enough to help him to his feet. They scampered away down the other side just seconds before I was able to pull myself up off the slope.

I looked down into a wide valley of sand, featureless but for the great white circle of a shell midden. There was an airship parked on it.

Now this was 1860, mind you, and here was this thing that looked like an Easter egg designed by Jules Verne sitting on a prehistoric shell midden. It was all of some purply-silver metal and it had portholes, and riveted plates, and scrollwork and curlicues that made no kind of aerodynamic sense. It wasn't one of our ships, certainly. It bore no resemblance to a silver saucer; but then, this was 1860, wasn't it? Nearly a hundred years before anything crashed in a place called Roswell.

The little figures ran for it, sobbing in alarm to the others who stood around the ship. They all turned to stare at me, except for one who was crouched over, trying to pull a snowsuit on up around himself. As all the

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others screamed at the sight of me, he straightened up and looked. It was the hermit.

"O, not to worry," he told them: "I know her." He put his hands up to form a trumpet around his mouth and shouted, "I regret I was not at home when yez come to call! It seems They've decided to take me to Mount Shasta to live with Them permanent-like! Ain't dat a grand thing, now?"

"Your Library!" I croaked. The little creatures were frantically tossing basket after basket of shells in through the open door of the airship, and two of them grabbed the hermit's arms to try to hurry him the rest of the way into his suit. He gave me a slightly shamefaced shrug.

"Well, They found me out about that, and They're confiscating it; but They're good fellows, like I told yez, and They say I can open a school in Lemuria when she comes up. They say They'll have to test me worthiness some more, but dat's all right." One of them zipped up the front of his suit and pressed a pair of goggles into his hands, signing several times that he should put them on at once. The others were vanishing inside the ship as fast as they could get through the door.

But I wasn't about to follow them now, priority or no priority, not after the brain-scrambling I'd got when they'd overflown me. My self-preservation program was finally working again, and I stood rooted in place watching the hermit fit the goggles on over his spectacles while the one remaining creature gibbered and tugged on his arm.

"Half a minute, there, I can't see through this—there now. Why, it's all funny-looking. Say," he called across to me, "Yez might see if the Sisterhood's interested in coming out here to the dunes. I still think it's a capital place for a great center of learning." The ship began to tremble and hum, and the creature turned to dart through the door, pulling the hermit after him. I recoiled from the waves of radiation that flooded outward. The hermit paused in the doorway, looking back to me, and went on shouting:

"Because, ye know, the vibrations hereabouts is so powerful yez can almost—" the door slid shut with a dull bang, trapping a lock of his beard as the ship began its ascent into the sky. The ascent paused, the door slid open a half-inch and the beard vanished inside; the door slammed again and the ship zoomed upward a few hundred meters, until without turning it sped off at an angle and vanished from sight.

I stood staring for a long moment. Aware that I was still clutching the one clamshell I had managed to grab, I raised my hand painfully and examined it. I nearly screamed.

It was a nice little study of ducks paddling happily on a lake. And look: here were some children on the shore of the lake, feeding the ducks. At least, they might have been children. Oh, who was I kidding? They weren't children, they were Visitors from Somewhere who had found a

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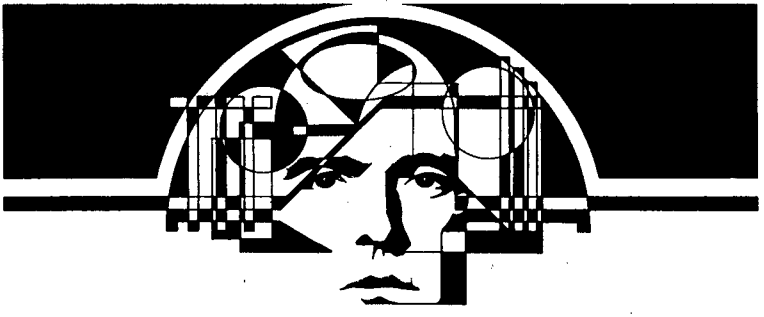
unique life form in these dunes. Like me, they had tested a sample; like me, they were transplanting it.

I let my arm drop to my side. Now that the ship had gone I could see across the midden to the high dune beyond, where clamshell letters ten feet high shouted silently:

NOT ALONE. ●



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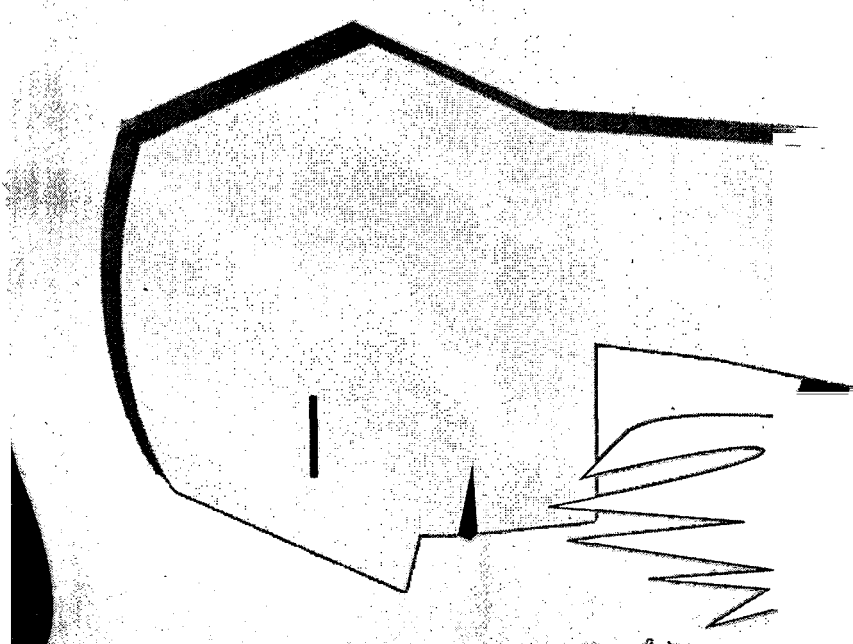
waiting for the grief fairy

i put my problems
under my pillow when
i go to sleep (or go
to bed to try to sleep),
but in the morning
there is never
any change.

—W. Gregory Stewart



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Ian Watson

THE SHORTEST NIGHT

"The Shortest Night," like the author's earlier story, "The Tragedy of Solveig" (December 1996), takes place in the world of Kaleva. This planet is the venue of his recent science fantasy epic *The Books of Mauna* (comprising *Lucky's Harvest* and *The Fallen Moon*). Mr. Watson's latest novels are *Oracle* and *Hard Questions*.

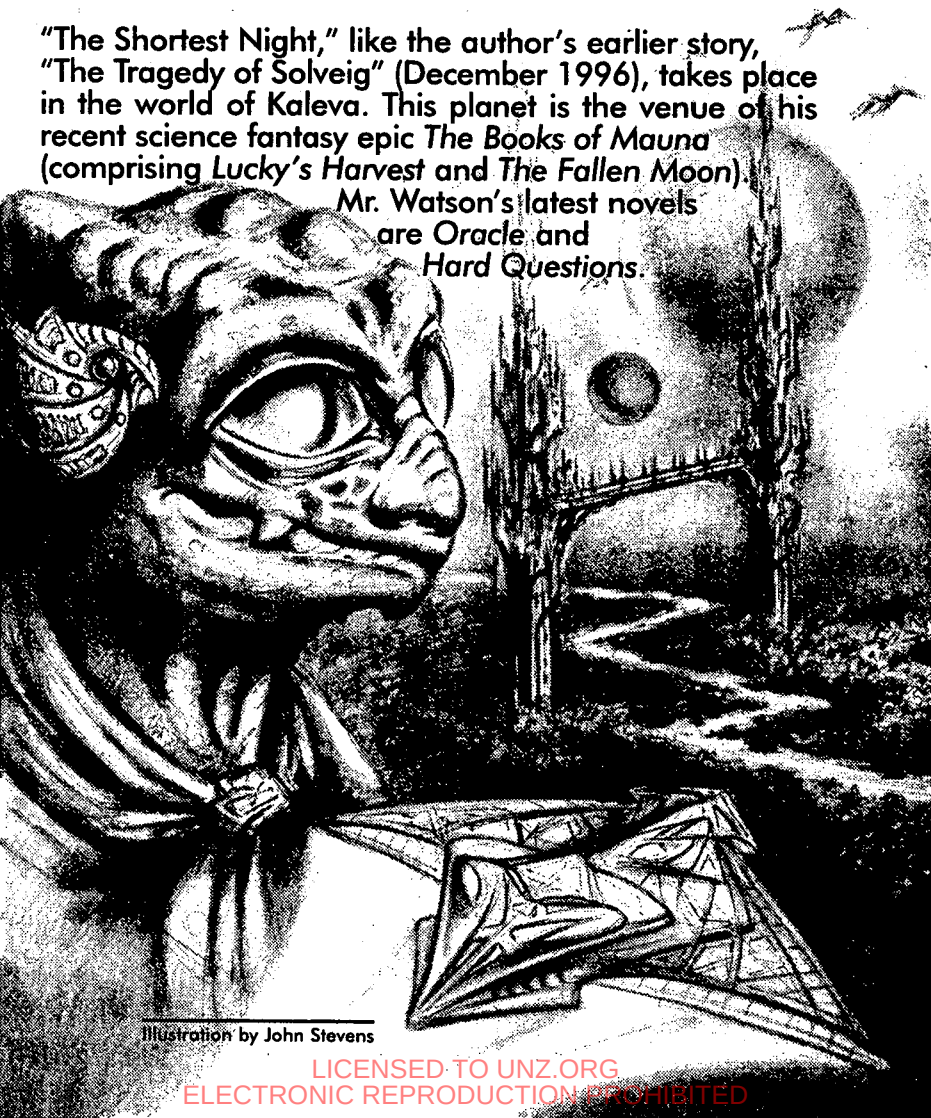

Illustration by John Stevens

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"This is a night as never will be.
"You'll go back to sea and never see me,
"Not again, oh my dusky mariner . . ."

Wistfully the tangomeister warbled. The tango combo twanged and plainted away on violin, guitar, and accordion. Cymbals provided a rippling punctuation. Music in a minor key, suitable for public courtship. Courtship, of a sort, was in progress in Momma Rakasta's establishment as the black sailors and the white hostesses smooched around the dance floor or chatted at tables over barley-beers, blueberry liqueurs, glasses of spirit.

The décor was gilt and plush, the curtaining velvet. The glass shades of the oil lamps were multicolored mosaics. The tubby baritone vocalist and his bandsmen wore matching lace shirts and black breeches, with red ribbon rosettes on their knees. *Chum-chum-chum,* was the rhythm.

Words and music were maudlin in a deeply affecting way. This tango might have been caressing and gentling the sailors—proclaiming at them to moderate their behavior in case some drunken brawl threatened to trash the establishment or cause abuse to the young ladies.

Young Andrew, whom Bosco was keeping an eye on, had paired off with a willowy lass. Bosco's own hostess, chosen after some deliberation, was a bit older than most of the girls. This appealed to Bosco since she would have some depth.

Astrid was tall and full figured, in her billowy white linen blouse and bountiful skirt of red and blue stripes. Her blue bodice, unbuttoned, exhibited blouse-clad tits which had *form.* Her long hair was a flaxen yellow.

"What *is* a Conga?" she asked Bosco. The *Conga* was the name of the four-master he sailed on.

"It's a long file of dancers. Each claspin' the waist of the one in front." He mimed clutching her waist, though they were both sitting down. "It kind o' suggests all the successive positions of our ship on the chart as she skips across the sea from one day to the next. Also, there's a mighty river in old Africa away on Earth called the Conga."

"Do you speak African at home down south in Pootara?"

"Naw, my darling. We mostly speak Anglo-lingo, just like the folks at the Earthkeep in Landfall, though we can all talk Kalevan too. Every immigrant imbibes Kalevan in their dreams on the way to this world, whether they're whites destined for up here with its passions and manias, or blacks bound for the south and the life of sweet reason. Now the *Conga,* fine ship, she's what we call a hermaphrodite schooner—meanin' that she carries fore-and-aft an' also square-rigged sails to make her fast and lean. I'm no hermaphrodite," and he winked.

"I'm sure you aren't." Astrid played with her hair. "Do you sail to Tumio as well?"

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That was the other deep-sea port, six hundred keys westward. Where the mana-bishop dwelled in his palace next to the baroque yellow-brick temple of magic. At Tumio, a major river spilled into a bay. This made commerce with the interior easier than at Portti, from which goods needed to be hauled onward by land and by lake.

"All black newcomers travel via Tumio, to gain passage across the isle-crowded ocean to Pootara where democracy and level-headedness prevail . . ." Bosco couldn't resist a little boast.

"It must be lovely there," she murmured. "In Pootara."

"You aren't from hereabouts, are you?" he asked, and she shook her head.

Maybe Bosco was moved by the sentimental tango music.

"I can't help feeling that you're a bit of a castaway here in Portti, Astrid. A castaway of the land rather than of the sea."

"Cast a sway," she sang softly. She sounded as though she was echoing him, but not really.

"Cast a sway on me," sang the tangomeister.
"And never set me free
"Till the stars drown in the sea . . ."

"Shall we go upstairs?" he proposed.

She wasn't ready yet. "Another glass of blueberry, first?"

"Fine by me."

"There's no magic in Pootara at all?"

"No sways, no manias, no proclaimers bespeakin' people, no shamans, no cuckoo birds. The way I see it, Astrid, we come to Kaleva courtesy of that living asteroid starship-thing that calls itself the Ukko. Now, Earth has built shuttle-ships to load the Ukko an' unload it, but that Ukko has its *own* agenda involvin' compellin' folks to live out all sorts o' colorful stories up here in the north for its amusement. I bet cuckoos are communicatin' with Mother Ukko mentally all the time. Us blacks are in the south by way of ballast an' stability, so that everyone don't go nuts on this world. You white folks here in the north are sorta like the pets of the Ukko. As compensation, you get a whole land out here among the stars, wherever here is—and no 'stronomer's ever been able to say for sure—"

Unaccountably, Astrid shuddered.

"—and mebbe it's never-never-space the Ukko brings us to, not in the same universe as Earth at all."

She nibbled at her lip. "What about the Isi snakes and their Juttie slaves? The snakes use their own Ukkos to reach here. They seem to know more than us."

"Seem to; so people say. Mebbe the Ukkos use them alien snakes as *dif-*

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ferent sorts of toys, to add spice to the pudding. Have you ever seen a Juttahat?"

"Yes. . . ." She wouldn't enlarge on this.

Astrid's breasts did indeed have form. Her left breast also possessed something else.

Upstairs in one of the boudoirs, after transacting the first bout of business—over which we'll draw a discreet blanket or silken sheet—Bosco reclined, studying her tattoo.

It was an elaborate one: of a cuckoo bird with a white milkcup flower in its beak.

Being situated within an inch of a nipple, which was just like a pink bub-berry, the milkcup bloom seemed well suited to its location. But a cuckoo? Plumes of verdigris and rust. Big snoopy yellow eyes. Eavesdropping feline ears.

One of the bird's feet was crippled and twisted. This had to be an illustration of a specific cuckoo, not just a picture of cuckoos in general.

Northerners used cuckoos to send a message or brag about some great deed, after feeding a bird a dollop of offal and calling out to it, "Ukko-ukkoo, hark to the story and tell the tale!" Since all cuckoos (except for this one) looked much the same, you couldn't be sure that the bird that harked was the same one that subsequently repeated the words, twenty or fifty keys away, next day or ten days later.

And you couldn't ask the birds if they communicated telepathically, because they didn't ever confide anything about themselves. As for coercing a bird to answer—or trapping one to fix an identity ring round its scrawny ankle—that was totally taboo. Captive cuckoo in a cage, puts all Kaleva in a rage. Awful woe would follow. The bird on Astrid's left tit couldn't have gotten its injury from any act of human pique or meddling.

"I'm thinkin' there's a strange story inscribed on your bosom, Astrid. Right next to your heart, you might say—"

He was aware that his hooded eyes lent him a drowsy look, inspiring confidence. Yet she drew away.

"It's past and best forgotten."

"How can you forget, when it's pictured on your own skin?"

She wouldn't answer.

Bosco had paid for a full night in the boudoir. He had advised Andrew likewise, lending him some silver marks and a golden or with the mad Queen's head on it.

He dozed, as one does when sated; and woke around midnight. Astrid wasn't abed. Silhouetted naked on a stool, she was gazing out of the little half-open window at the grey gloaming of the shortest night, which was still clear of clouds.

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He watched her for a while, admiring and anticipating yet also aware that this nightwatch she was keeping held some deep meaning for her.

Presently, he slid himself out of bed. Softly he padded over to her. He could tell by Astrid's breathing that she hoped he wouldn't overwhelm this moment with hanky-panky. So he just hunkered down beside her. Out in town, bonfire lights were flickering. Distant noises of revelry drifted. Very likely some people would be settling old scores. Fueled by booze, the murder rate soared on this briefest night of the year.

The window faced north, away from the sky-sickle that spanned the southern horizon. From Portti, on account of the cliffs of its fjord, only the very top of that silver bridge was visible—that ring of debris from a long-since disintegrated moon that had come too close to the planet. From this window, the sickle wasn't visible at all. Few stars pricked the luminous gloom where night and day were joining hands. The brightest body was the gas-giant world, like a tiny masthead lantern far away.

"There's Otso," he murmured.

Essentially the sky looked empty.

"All the stars have drowned in the sea," he joked gently. "Us mariners like to see a few constellations."

"*I don't.*" Even though it was warm, Astrid shivered.

"The Archer and the Cow, the Harp . . . and the Cuckoo," he hinted, "the Cuckoo."

Of a sudden, she began to talk hauntedly. It was as if her tattoo was compelling her to tell the tale.

"I was at Castle Cammon, enthralled by Tycho the tyrant, when he commissioned a young astronomer called Jon Kelpo to redraw the map of the sky. . . ."

Tycho Cammon the tyrant was notorious. Cuckoos cackled about him all over the continent.

Cammon's realm was six or seven hundred keys away to the north-east of Portti. Thirty-odd keys further to the east of Castle Cammon was Kallio Keep, where Astrid's dad, Lord Taito Kallio, held a small woodland domain.

Bosco has just been in bed with a minor lord's daughter . . . Surely she rarely confides this to other clients at Momma Rakasta's. Does even the Momma know?

The Kallio domain was noted for its kastanut and musktree groves, and for an unusually large number of precious ivorywood trees. The Kallios husbanded those ivorywoods on an ecologically sound basis, planting out new saplings to replace felled stock that was mainly destined for expensively crafted prestige furniture.

Some domains are huge, such as that of Tapper Kippan the Forest Lord, which includes Portti. Or Saari over in the east. Others are much

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smaller. The Cammon and Kallio land holdings and the others thereabouts were modest in scale. However, Ivan Cammon, Tycho's father, had an acquisitive, predatory attitude to life. His marriage to Sophie Donner of Verinitty (just to the north) proved, as time went by, to have virtually united both domains under Cammon control. So Astrid's dad was wary.

He was doubly and trebly wary as Ivan Cammon's eldest son grew up. The lad was well favored and gifted, *but* . . .

"Ukko-ukkoo," a cuckoo would cackle, "a cocksure rooster crowed from its dunghill at young Tycho Cammon, and he bespoke it to burst itself. Feathers and flesh went flying in all directions."

That was only the beginning. Before long Tycho was bespeaking farmers' daughters to spread themselves for him or come home with him as his compliant toys. Woe betide any fathers or brothers who interfered.

One lad tried to intervene when Tycho called his girl away. Ruptured by Tycho's brutal words, the boyfriend died lingeringly of peritonitis. The lass was obliged to enjoy herself pleasuring Tycho until he tired of her. A cruel streak, cruel.

Tycho's power as a proclaimer was admirable when he used it against Unmen. Tycho's father loved hunting fierce hervies in the woods to mount their racks of horns in his banqueting hall; but the son hunted more intelligent prey—servants of the alien snakes bent on spying and mischief and kidnap. What's more, Tycho was soon traveling as his domain's champion to the autumn galas in Yulistalax to pit himself against other proclaimers. Voice against voice. Sway against sway. Mana-wrestlers.

Although Tycho was handsome as well as clever and gifted, he also made abominable misuse of his talent. People began mumbling about his one minor disfigurement—a wart on his right cheek—as being his *verrin's nipple.*

Verinitty, his mother's home, had been pestered by the vicious carnivores until they were controlled by poison bait. The implication was that a verrin might have bitten Tycho's cheek as a child, sucking on the wound and infecting him with its saliva.

"His father's been somewhat of a check on Tycho's excesses," Taito Kallio told Astrid on the day when a cuckoo cried the news about the goring-to-death of Ivan Cammon by a bull hervy. "But what now—?"

Father and daughter were in Astrid's chamber. It was the first day of June. The mullioned windows stood open, admitting a breath of musk, even though trees and riverside town were quite far below. The keep occupied a sheer little butte, a rare upthrust of rock. Access was by way of a steep winding path. Goods were usually winched upward vertically, but Astrid must have made her way up and down that path a few thousand times by now, with the result that her thighs and calves were muscular.

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Tapestries of sun-dappled trees and lakes hung on the walls. At this time of year the pot-bellied stove was cold and dead, like a suit of armor for a fat dwarf. A cabinet held dozens of Pootaran wooden puzzles, which Astrid collected: artful assemblages of tiny notched rhombs and pyramids and such, in contrasting polished woods.

Astrid had recently celebrated her twenty-first birthday. Dismantled on a tray lay the pieces of a particularly complicated puzzle entirely made of ivorywood. Her dad had secretly commissioned the puzzle a whole year earlier through the Pootaran trade emporium and consulate in Landfall. Taito had supplied a block of ivorywood specially for the purpose.

"I hear a special cuckoo keeps watch on Tycho Cammon all the time," she said.

"He's such a source of tales, dear."

"The same crippled cuckoo follows him everywhere, they say. Except, I suppose, when it sneaks off to pass its tattle on."

"Now that Tycho's the lord," said her dad, "if he comes here I'm going to refuse to receive him. We'll block the cliff-path. Rig deadfalls of rock. We'd better lay in more supplies than usual. We'll simply sit up here until he goes away."

"What about the town?"

Tycho might avenge himself for the insult.

"I know we're responsible for their welfare down there," agreed her dad, "but we can't bring everyone up here for shelter, can we? I can't face him down. I'm not a proclaimer. Let's keep our fingers crossed."

Her dad had no mana-power. Anyone could be affected by mania, but to be able to affect other people was very much rarer. Nor was Taito assertive in a browbeating way, although he could be stubborn or subtle. Stroking his balding blond head, Astrid's father brooded.

"If we managed to pick him off with a rifle bullet or crossbow quarrel, long distance—beyond the range of his voice—we'd have a feud on our hands, or a full-scale war. The twin-domain might gobble us up."

"How about if we invite a proclaimer to be a permanent guest here? Pay him in ivorywood?"

"A hero in the house? Dashing and handsome, too? Trouncing Cammon, then whisking you off your feet, besotted with him?"

"That's highly unlikely," Astrid reassured her father.

"How would we come by this champion? Tell cuckoos to cackle about our requirements everywhere? We'd be advertising our anxiety and vulnerability. Our champion might fail. Where would we be then?"

Father and daughter saw eye to eye, although the town remained unavoidably exposed. Astrid rummaged in her puzzle tray, picked up two pieces and slotted them together.

"Fingers crossed," she agreed.

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How fond they were of one another. Astrid's mum, Lady Kallio, was usually preoccupied with her embroidery, stitching flower-strewn fables with sublime skill, the floral decoration mattering more to her than the nakki-imps who peeped from her scenes. She would embroider a story of the fairy Si-si-dous drinking a dewdrop and singing to a spellbound fellow, who would be lucky to make his escape when Si-si-dous got hungry. Man and fairy would be inundated in apricot bellflowers and violet starflowers and jismin and heartbells.

Astrid herself was addicted to wooden puzzles. And she liked to stargaze from the tower of the keep—sometimes at the entire panorama, sometimes selectively using her dad's spy-glass to home in on, say, Otso with its moon-cubs.

She also loved to roam the woods with a girlfriend from the town, Anniki Tamminen, supposedly collecting mushrooms or flowers for her mother. Astrid's mania certainly wasn't men, except perhaps for her devotion to her dad. She showed no signs of falling in love with any fellows.

Which might be just as well.

Astrid's young brother Gustaf, who would inherit, was frail. A succession of chest complaints and digestive disorders plagued the lad, despite the best efforts of the town's mana-priest and of its wise woman—who was, in fact, the mother of Astrid's bosom-friend—and despite the occasional assistance of a grumpy shaman who lived in the ivorywoods.

"When Gustaf grows up and brings a bride here"—so her dad had said on a number of occasions; fingers crossed, and tilt a mirror so that any imp of sickness will slide off it—"if you're still here you'll be a guiding influence."

Cuckoo-news arrived that Tycho Cammon was celebrating his accession to the lordship by setting out on horseback with a band of cronies to raid the territory of the snakes and their slaves to the northeast of Saari—the Velvet Isi area.

Quite an expedition, when he owned no sky-boat. Could Cammon have turned over a new leaf, aiming to be admirable rather than abominable? His route should take him far enough to the north of Kallio land.

Several weeks later, Cammon's return was unheralded by any cackle, as if cuckoo-birds wished to see what would happen if he arrived unexpectedly. . . .

A ginger fluff of fallen feathery blooms carpeted the musktree grove. Soft potpourri lay everywhere upon the ground, headily fragrant in decay. Above azure chimney-flowers, clouds of sizzleflies drifted like puffs of smoke as a heat-hazy sun climbed toward noon.

Astrid and Anniki lay side by side, nuzzling and touching tenderly. They must have been heedless. Could ginger fluff muffle hoofbeats so

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thoroughly? Maybe Cammon had stealthed the sound of his steed's approach, and that of his crony's, by proclaiming it so.

Suddenly: two horses, and their riders. Both piebald mounts were stocky and shaggy with long bushy fly-whisk tails. The travel-stained riders wore leathers and boots. Through slings strapped to the saddlebags: rifle and crossbow.

Reining in: "Now what *do* we have here?"

Astrid and Anniki were already scrambling up, adjusting their skirts.

"Enchanting! And deserving enchantment—"

The wart on the speaker's right cheek! It was him.

Sensual lips—fat, self-indulgent lips. Heavy jowls. A narrow arc of beard. A high protuberant forehead, and tight fair curls. Handsome, but already with intimations of a brutal and libertine cast, which in time (and not a long time, either) would make his face heavy and oppressive. Such a muscular build.

"So ripely deserving—"

As the two men dismounted, Astrid and Anniki fled as fast as they could amidst the musktrees.

"Hark and hear," Cammon's voice bellowed. Running, Astrid stuck her fingers in her ears. She knew the routes. And the roots, which might trip. Anniki knew, as well. However, Anniki hadn't climbed up and down that butte-path a few thousand times. Her legs weren't as strong; her puff was less. She couldn't sprint and also plug her ears.

When Cammon and his crony caught Anniki, and whirled her around, she would surely have cried out, "My mother's the wise-woman. She'll lay a spell on you." At which, Cammon would have laughed.

That must have been how it was; or something similar.

"We need your lovely friend too! Where's she hiding herself? Where's she gone to?"

Seeking protection by association, Anniki would have burbled: "She's the Lord's daughter—!"

"Is she indeed? That maiden needs a *man*."

From the roof of the tower, Lord Taito and his daughter took turns gazing through the spyglass at events transpiring down below in the little town of white-painted wooden houses and red tiled roofs.

The telescope was the work of a maker of glass and lenses in Niemi, southernmost of the three main towns of Saari. A Mr. Ruokokoski. His sign was engraved on the collapsible brass tube: an eyeball with wings.

Accompanying Tycho Cammon were a dozen armed men. Fourteen horses. And one Unman, black-skinned, sable-liveried, a prisoner.

Prisoner of words, very likely, rather than of manacles. Cammon had

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posed the Juttahat in the town square for folk to gawp at, if they wished. The alien stood utterly motionless.

Some desultory looting was in progress; not really much more than replenishment of supplies. At Mrs. Tamminen's house there seemed to be a commotion. Was she being evicted?

Halfway through the afternoon, a leather-clad envoy set foot on the butte-path. He waved a white kerchief on a stick. Cammon watched from a safe distance, a horse between himself and the keep. Taito and Astrid were out of earshot of Cammon, even if he roared. Taito's retainers wore wax plugs in their ears, melted from candles. Their instructions were simple enough. Release those boulders if Cammon ascends in person.

Admittedly, a great proclaimer could bespeak hard soil into quicksand, and such tricks—and soil has no ears nor knowledge of words. Yet Cammon wouldn't want to strain himself and drain his energy.

"If only I could fasten this spyglass to a rifle," Taito mused. "He's in range, if I fired downward." It was a vain hope. At best, the horse would be hit. Cammon would scurry away.

Once the envoy had recovered his breath, he bawled upward faintly, "Lord Tycho Cammon—invites Lord Taito's daughter—to dine with him."

Fat chance of that.

Next morning—after what sort of night for Anniki?—that cuckoo with the crippled foot had alighted on the tower top. The lookout had summoned Taito, along with Astrid.

The bird blinked, groggily. Its feathers were ruffled. In its beak it held a white flower—a milkcup—which it dropped.

"Hark and hear," the bird squawked, "a milkcup for the maiden, but for her unfriendly father a soulflower of death—

"Death," cackled the cuckoo, "by heart-sickness. Lord Tycho yearns in his heart for your daughter. Your own heart will squeeze itself unless you yield her. *This is spoken.*"

Taito's intake of breath was agonized.

"Daddy—!"

How, how had Tycho Cammon compelled a cuckoo to convey a woe? To act a proclaimer's vehicle, as his ventriloquist's dummy—! The words the bird repeated were imbued with Tycho's own power, although the bird itself seemed distressed or outraged.

"You have until midday," it squawked. Having delivered its message, the cuckoo threw itself from the tower, with what seemed like suicidal clumsiness. Down it plummeted. It contrived to glide. Next it was fluttering frantically, veering away from the town, as if its precipitate dive had snapped some string that controlled it, and now it was escaping.

White-faced, her father clutched his chest.

"No," he gasped. "No."

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The regular squeezes of pain persuaded her father less than Astrid's pleas that he let her save him. Where would she be without him? And Gustaf was still too young.

She might not be gone too long. To validate this hope, all she took with her at noon was the ivorywood puzzle in a little leather pouch slung round her neck by its drawstring.

Tycho Cammon greeted Astrid jovially in the town square, as pleased as a lad receiving a present. An entourage of three louts were keeping an eye out, clustering round the alien who stood so still.

Astrid demanded, "Is my father safe now?"

Cammon scanned the sky, which was clouding over.

"Right as rain," he assured her. "You have my word for it." Near the mouth of a lane, Astrid spied a man's body lying face down. His head was twisted at an impossible angle.

"Murderer," she accused.

Cammon followed her gaze. "Him? Oh, he shook his head at our activities." Putting on a childish lisp: "He shook it and he shook it so much—"

Shuddering, Astrid stared at the motionless Unman instead.

A silver hieroglyph was appliquéd on one shoulder of the alien's velvety bodysuit that was as black as its skin, but scuffed and soiled. Empty pouches hung from clips. White scabs crusted gland-slits on the alien's jutting chin, below a prim cupid mouth. Its nostrils slowly opened and shut as it breathed, which was its only activity. Such hurt showed in the close-set ambery eyes.

Despite her aversion to the alien, sympathy percolated—fellow feeling.

"What are you going to do with it?"

"With *it?* It's a *him*. Oh, I have a use for him all right."

She imagined herself and the alien compelled to mate, to amuse Cammon the spectator. Surely he was too covetous of Astrid to dream up such a humiliation. Cammon the violator would seem just as alien to her.

She had no other audience except for Cammon and his louts, unless nearby residents were peeping. Townsfolk were keeping to their houses. Just then she heard a distant wail of protest, and recalled the presence of other cronies.

"Actually, my splendid chick," Cammon said graciously, "this town square of yours seemed to lack a focal point until now. It needed a statue."

"He looks very sad," she said. "Tormented."

"*Dear me.* Of course!" Cammon snapped his fingers. "Blink, Juttie, blink for the lady."

Membranes glazed the alien's eyes, sliding to and fro. Tears poured forth.

"I quite forgot they need to blink. Jig a bit, there's a good statue. Jig on the spot."

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Jerkily the Juttie capered—and fell over. In the dust of the square it writhed, arms and legs spasming.

"Guess he got cramp," said Cammon. "Relax, statue. Lie at ease!" And the alien lolled. "You must remind me, Astrid Kallio, not to use him up too quickly."

"You're cruel. . . ." Not a wise thing to say.

"*What do you want him for?*"

This might also be unwise. Yet Cammon treated her question with the utmost seriousness.

"The truth is, I need him to tell me the names and the meanings of the stars and the constellations in the Isi tongue, and also of their own home stars and constellations."

"Whatever for?"

"The sky *presides* over us," he replied. "And over them."

"What if he doesn't know? Does a scullery lad know the words for embroidery?"

"Snakes' voices speak in the Jutties' heads—informing them of all sorts of things."

"*I* watch the sky at night." She hoped to forge—no, not a bond—but some affinity.

He chortled. "What a fine hen you are. And a hen must be plucked."

"I came to you voluntarily, Tycho Cammon. You didn't call me down here with your voice. Don't bespeak me now."

"If I don't, summerbright, how will you enjoy yourself?"

Astrid glanced up at the keep, as if her look might leap her back to safety. The air was becoming hazy, faintly moist. Mizzle was dulling the outlines of the keep. Upon the tower: a tiny figure. Surely her dad, with his spyglass. She waved, to reassure.

Coming down the lane past the corpse, led by a man in leathers, was . . . Anniki, in a cloak. Anniki looked utterly dulled and compliant. From the man's holster jutted the butt of a light-pistol. Nobody would be obstructing *him*. The escort halted Anniki.

"See," said Cammon, "your friend's right as rain as well."

The two women's gazes met, across empty space. It was as if Astrid had betrayed Anniki by making a temporary get-away to the keep—while Anniki in turn had betrayed Astrid by revealing her identity.

Cammon was severing Astrid's ties with home.

Astrid had half hoped—and half feared—that Cammon would take her to the Tamminens' vacated house, full of wholesome herbs and dried mushrooms and roots.

That wasn't to be. Accompanied by the trio of bodyguards, Cammon led her instead to the candlemaker's home. To Mr. Kintilar's. Kintilar and family had been temporarily dispossessed. All of his candles remained.

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She knew the house and its smells from childhood: the odors of paraffin wax distilled from yellover wood and muskwood and kastawood, and also from bituminous shale; the aroma of scent oils.

Downstairs were Mr. Kintilar's double boilers and pouring pitchers and tin molds. Bowls of baking powder to extinguish any wax that might catch alight. Bowls of fatty acid crystals to render wax opaque and slower burning. Spools of braided yarn, tin molds, weights for wicks. Everywhere, everywhere, finished candles were tied in clumps or hung in pairs from nails.

Everywhere, hundreds of cock-candles.

All the way up the staircase, and in the main bedroom too.

The louts stayed downstairs to drink ale filched from the larder and snack on squeaky cheesebread and cold greasy goose. If only they weren't down below, where the creak of floorboards and bed would be audible!

In the main bedroom, hundreds of candles crowded shelves and furniture. . . .

"What illumination we'll see," enthused Cammon, "if all the wicks are lit! Maybe the house'll burn down. . . ."

"All the wax will melt," she retorted. "It'll become so soft!" As if *she* could proclaim at *him*.

He concentrated, summoning his power. "Wicks a-light, Burn bright, Such a sight!" he proclaimed.

"Five, six, Hot wicks, Pricks and chicks! Burn bright, Wicks a-light—!"

It was as if phosphorbugs were invading the room, each settling on a candle tip. How could it be so dark outside? Could black rainclouds have arrived so quickly in the wake of what had hardly even been drizzle? As a hundred candles breathed out little flames, and as the window framed only deep gloom, so at once there was privacy . . . and imminent revelation.

Deeply scared, Astrid loosened her blue bodice sacrificially.

"Don't bespeak me. . . ."

Yet he did. He was a petulant child indulging in a tantrum—yet his was a channeled tantrum.

He chanted:

"You shall love men, You shall love me,
"Shall-love-men, Shall-love-me,
ShallLoveMen, ShallLoveMe—"

Faster and faster he chanted. A sway to sweep her from her feet, from her rootedness in her own self.

To try to divert the sway, to give it a different channel down which to run, a drain to take it away, she shrieked, "I love my father!"

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In vain. The sheer force in Tycho Cammon. Such a torrent. Astrid's hair streamed in a gale, baring her brow. Candle flames danced.

Everywhere, swaying lights. Music wailed in her mind. Blood-rhythm pounded. She was undressing, wrenching garments off—as was he. She was dancing naked in a clearing—the room's walls were reeking musk-trees. She was capering in front of a great candle-mushroom. She must leap and bestride—so that spores would gush from its gills, so that sticky spawn would spout.

Soon, she deflowered herself, gasping and crying out.

Just as had been bespoken.

Looking back, Astrid's time at Castle Cammon—until the coming of the astronomer—was spent in a state of semi-trance. Hers was a sick addiction to a euphoric drug, namely Tycho himself. As time went by, Tycho tormented her by withholding this drug progressively so that she craved in vain, losing all focus.

His castle of pink granite occupied a rocky island around which a river divided. Twin towers soared, linked at their penultimate stories by a high bridge of tammywood. A similar bridge spanned the river, to lead to the smoky little town of miners and smelters and smiths. The prevailing breeze almost always blew haze away over pastures beyond. Visibility from the tower tops was rarely impaired.

On top of the western tower, the Juttie was kept in a cage. Slim numbered bars imposed a grid upon the heavens. On clear nights a scribe (who was also a draftsman) copied down by candlelight upon charts the alien names of stars and star groups. He filled a ledger with annotations—not only regarding Kaleva's sky, but also the sky of the alien's home world, wherever that might be. A little rooftop hut gave the scribe storage and shelter from squalls. During balmy weather he even took to sleeping there by day.

The Juttie was one of those who could make himself understood to humans, in that strange eternal-present style of speech, accompanied by clicks and hisses. Otherwise, Tycho would hardly have brought him. Astrid sat in on some of these sessions of interrogation, to watch the stars for herself and to compare the alien's submissive captivity with her own.

"Star being the Egg-*k*-Tooth of the Preciousssss One who wassss dreaming*k* the taming and raising-to-reason of the Two-Legsss," she would hear.

The scribe would grunt and squint and scribble the enigmatic words, which few in the castle or the town were able to read—least of all Tycho, otherwise his own spoken words would be gelded of power.

The same scribe penned Astrid's intermittent messages to her father, which Tycho insisted on her sending. These could hardly be sent by cuckoo, or they might be cackled in any marketplace.

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By now, Tycho wanted Astrid as his bride—freely granted by her father, so that Tycho could start claiming some control over Kallio land. The knowledge that Astrid was a hostage must have been anguish for her dad. But he was holding out for Gustaf's sake. After the defection of the crippled cuckoo, Tycho couldn't reach Taito with his voice to speak a woe at him a second time.

Astrid must send pleas to her father, which she half-believed or even believed passionately after Tycho bespoke her to do so—until nausea or apathy set in. *Daddy, I must wed Tycho. He is my life now. . . .*

Her father wasn't a fool.

Tycho had already enjoyed the goods. He could do so whenever he chose. She was a commodity. As witness: her commemorative tattoo, which Tycho had an artist from town impose on her breast as a brand of ownership, though less painfully than a branding.

Astrid's relations with the fat Dowager Lady Cammon were as slight as with Tycho's two younger brothers. The Dowager's mania was cookery, and the lads, who had none of Tycho's talent, spent their time running wild, hunting soarfowl in the reeds and scampery leppis in the woods, and keeping out of the way.

In spite of straw and a brazier in the cage and a big canvas cover with a smoke-hole—like some cloth tossed over a birdcage—and despite a sheepskin coat, toward the end of the first winter the Juttie succumbed at last. Worn out. Used up. Chilled to death. Astrid could hardly feel that she had lost a companion.

Her real companion was her ivorywood puzzle. Tycho sometimes teased her cruelly that he might send pieces of it to accompany each message as a token of authenticity and sincerity.

On other occasions Tycho was almost vulnerable—scaringly so. Once, he wept in Astrid's arms at the way he felt increasingly compelled to compel others. He was scared of losing absolute control, so that his gift became his governor.

The Dowager's delicious meddlings in the castle kitchens might have been to blame for her son's increase in girth. Spending her days with scullions was somewhat *infra dig*, but Tycho could hardly bespeak his mother not to do so. The Dowager made sublime fish stock—she wouldn't become a laughingstock as well. Any sniggerers would end up hanging by their fingertips from the high tower-bridge.

To Astrid's delight, which she kept secret, one day she discovered that the ivorywood puzzle had two quite different solutions. One route assembled the pieces into the quadratic prism. That was the shape the puzzle had first been in when she unwrapped her birthday gift. The other route, even more difficult to achieve, fitted them all together as a star. Her name-sign!

Those Pootaran puzzle-makers way across the sea had certainly been

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ingenious. Her dad must have known about the double solution all along. If it hadn't been for the abduction, he would have tipped her the wink after a few weeks. Now Astrid had discovered belatedly, by intuition. Because Tycho might be jealous of a shared secret, she didn't send any message to her dad that she had found out about the wooden star.

As for stars of a heavenly sort, in spite of the demise of the Juttie informant and the cryptic rigmaroles that had resulted, Tycho hadn't lost interest.

Come the springtime, he commissioned a telescope from the same Mr. Ruokokoski of Niemi who had ground the lenses for Taito Kallio's spyglass. By midsummer, hardly the best time for stargazing, the brass telescope had arrived, complete with wooden tripod. It was installed on the observatory tower beside the now-empty cage and the hut, which could shelter the instrument when not in use.

The novelty comforted Astrid. When nights became a little longer she stared at gassy Otso, even at ringed Surma out beyond Otso, although Surma is the emblem of death.

During leaf-fall later that year, Tycho traveled to the gala at Yulistalax to be famous, and he triumphed, even though his verbal victories over rival proclaimers were violent ones, causing pain and injury and humiliation.

When he returned, it was with Jon Kelpo, who might have been naïve to accept the tyrant's invitation, but who hankered for patronage and access to those alien star charts.

Names are often destiny. People are compelled to act out roles, though perhaps in an altered guise.

This became plain during the welcoming feast for the young astronomer, held a couple of weeks after his arrival. Tycho's mother had insisted on a delay so as to consider her menus.

Tapestries of hunting scenes and of fictitious raging battles with Unmen cloaked the granite of the walls in the banqueting hall, in between tall windows too slim for any intruder to climb through—the panes could be pivoted to let in air. Sharp-pronged horns of hervies jutted from plaques fixed to those tapestries—like eruptions of violence into the hall. Stoves were squat armored sentries. Dozens of candles burned in wall-sconces and in chandeliers high above the long table. Guests from town drank their fill but behaved themselves.

Oh there was black blood soup and cold poached fish and fish stew in broth and roe on ice. There was simmered veal and pigs' trotters, and lambleg with golden potatoes baked in a hollow log. Finally, there were to be sausage pancakes heaped with pink valleyberry and also colostrum pudding made from the first immuno-laden milk given by a cow after calving.

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Jon Kelpo was short and skinny, with a thin intent face. His hair was nut-brown. His hazel eyes were wonderfully expressive. Over a white silk shirt tucked in his breeches he wore a striped scarlet waistcoat. The waistcoat was scuffed and less splendid than Tycho's finery; just as well.

Servants scurried. The fat Dowager fussed. Townsfolk crammed themselves with food in case she accused them of being picky. Equally, they must not seem to be gluttonous. Talk was scientific and over the heads of many guests, but they pretended deep interest—as did Arvid, the elder of Tycho's two junior brothers. The other brother was Armas. Both brothers were spruced for the occasion. The mana-priest from town contributed his best. Astrid, in a sky-blue gown, was genuinely interested.

Tycho was presenting himself as a patron of science.

"My name prompts me," he explained grandly to his audience. "There was once a famous astronomer on Earth named Tycho."

Jon Kelpo nodded. "I know, sir. We mentioned this in Yulistalax. He was a noble, like yourself. I've read—"

"You're obliged to read, whereas I'm obliged not to. Carry on. What did you read about him?"

"He was a genius, with wonderful eyesight and accuracy."

Tycho smiled. Not having had Kelpo's advantage—or disadvantage—of literacy, maybe he expected further flattery in the same vein.

"What else do you know about this noble genius?" he prompted.

Kelpo clammed up.

Tycho banged his pot of dark beer on the table. "Tell me. I bespeak you to." He did not exert too much power.

The young astronomer's vocal chords seemed in conflict. Tycho frowned, but then forced a smile.

"Be utterly frank," he reassured Kelpo. "You are my fool-of-reason—my rational shaman."

For a moment Astrid had difficulty understanding this. Then it came to her that, in Tycho's mind, an important motive for inviting the astronomer to Castle Cammon must be that Jon Kelpo was a man of science, not of mana-magic. Kelpo's presence might serve to counterpoise Tycho's fear of losing control to his impulses.

If Tycho had invited a shaman into his keep, instead, that would have been like attaching a lightning rod to one's head.

In a strangled tone Kelpo said, "The original Tycho fought with everyone. He was very quarrelsome with his equals. He was harsh with his underlings—"

"And I know how the original astronomer died," Tycho interrupted. "My father told me, as a warning. It happened at the court of the genius's royal patron. By etiquette nobody could leave the table until the king retired. The king liked to sit up late boozing. One night the astronomer in-

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dulged in far too much wine. His bladder became bloated. He couldn't leave."

Guests were exchanging nervous glances. Sweat was breaking out.

"Is this a suitable topic to be talking about during dinner?" demanded the Dowager, her feathers ruffled.

Tycho moderated himself. Very mildly he continued, "Finally, the astronomer's bladder burst. Poisoning set in. A few days later he died in agony. Enough, enough, I agree, Mother!"

Kelpo rallied. "The astronomer Tycho also had a pupil, named Kepler. Almost my own name, sir."

"So here you are, my rational shaman, as circumstances require."

In fact, Kelpo's name signified *brave*. Well, in coming here he was either intrepid or rash.

As the banquet progressed, it became clear that Tycho's motives in sponsoring astronomy were mixed and numerous. He also wished Jon Kelpo to create a new map of the Kalevan sky—to design new constellations to supersede the harp and the cuckoo, the archer and the imp perched on a mushroom.

If the Isi snakes link up the local stars in different patterns to those that human beings had come to perceive, why not a whole sky in honor of the Cammon family?

Of course, a constellation must be dedicated to Queen Lucky. But mainly there'd be: a hervy's horns, in honor of Tycho's dad. A cooking pot, for his mother. Speaker's lips, for himself and for all other proclaimers—the new constellations ought to appeal to everyone in the country. More plausible, more serviceable, more relevant! Oh, there must still be a cuckoo, but in this case a crippled cuckoo with a flower in its beak, which made Astrid flinch.

Megalomania . . .

Astrid's relationship with Jon Kelpo grew only gradually—paralleling her own weaning from that verrin's nipple, Tycho. It was as if some transfer of focus occurred.

At first, Kelpo begrudged the claim that Astrid sometimes made on the telescope. Did this young woman—whose status at Castle Cammon was questionable—imagine that she was a fellow scientist? However, as regards the task of redrawing the constellations, a telescope wasn't much use at all. The naked eye was best. To be sure, a telescope could reveal distant constellations too dim and tiny to notice ordinarily. What use was there in mapping those? Should he tell Tycho, "My lord, I've just found your very face hidden behind the Saucepan! Alas, no one can see it unaided."

Consequently Kelpo tolerated some stargazing by Astrid, maybe for silent company on the tower top.

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When winter came and night spilled into the day, after each new snowfall a servant would dig and sweep the rooftop clear. The river below was ice-bound under a thick white blanket. Wooden stakes marking the road toward town were half-swallowed. Yet the roof remained merely ice-glazed and crisp, instead of engulfed. There was always the brazier to warm one's mitts at, plus resort to the castle saunas when chill reached the bones; she to the women's, Jon Kelpo to the men's.

He was a strangely private person, with an inner intensity which found its outlet in the sky. Attempts to broach his personal history would bring a polite rebuff.

Until . . .

Winter had come and gone. Buds were bursting open. Snow was melting, splish-splash. On some nights the snow would crust again and the drippings would become icicles. In a restless fever, sweethearts would be carving their names in the bark of trees.

Up on the tower, the night was fairly mild. Showers of actual liquid rain had fallen during the afternoon. Stratus clouds were now breaking up into strato-cumulus as comparatively warm currents rose. Stars gleamed through rifts. Those rifts were on the move, frustrating observation.

"What *do* you keep in that little pouch you wear round your neck?" Kelpo asked Astrid, as though at long last he had fully noticed her. "There's no smell of any pomander ball. I suppose no pomander or mustoreum can ward Lord Cammon off."

This might have seemed an indelicate and insensitive remark. In fact, he was heeding her as an individual.

"I keep my puzzle in it, Jon."

She must show him.

She did so, by lantern light in the hut.

Ordinarily, Kelpo might have scorned such fiddling with wooden puzzles. He might still have done so, if Astrid had not felt an impulse to confide her secret—that this particular puzzle had two quite different solutions, one of which was a wooden star-shape. Kelpo seemed riveted. He asked to handle the pieces himself.

Twist and pivot the pieces as he might, he couldn't arrive at either result. She demonstrated. Still he couldn't copy what her hands were doing. To do so seemed suddenly important to him.

The next night was full of stars. Jon Kelpo couldn't concentrate on them.

Finally, he exclaimed to Astrid, "To see in two different possible ways! To see alternative connections: that's what Cammon wants me to do. Instead of an archer and a harp, a saucepan and a crippled cuckoo. . . . He doesn't know the half."

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He confessed his own secret.

When he was just a baby, a cuckoo had flown into his room—so his mother had assured him. The bird had perched on the head of his cradle. It had cackled, then shat in his eyes. Specifically, upon his nose so that the splash went in both directions. How Baby Jon had squealed. Quickly his mother had cleaned him. She called in a wise-woman to examine his eyes and a mana-priest to diagnose the meaning of the event.

"It's an omen of great things," the mana-priest had decided, after a trance. "Yet following upon those great things maybe your son will experience some shit."

When Jon reached puberty, he became able to see in a different way from other people. At first, the experience was spasmodic and inadvertent—scary. As time passed, he found he could summon the phenomenon by concentration.

"The stars are bright tonight," he said to Astrid. "The sky is black. But if I focus myself"—and he seemed to do so—"the sky becomes white and the stars are black dots. This is so useful for pinpointing stars, like grains of peppercorn spilled upon a linen tablecloth. Everything's reversed. Your fair face and hair are dark, as well."

"If *I'm* different," Astrid sang out, "then I'm somebody else—and somebody else is no longer Tycho's possession."

"My hand is black . . ." Jon held his hand out, reversed, toward her cheek, softly to touch, to stroke with his knuckles, with the backs of his fingers.

"Oh, but I feel I'm still swayed to seek the love of men," sighed Astrid. "Can you show me what you see? Can you sway me to see?"

"I'm no proclaimer—I can't tell someone to do something."

Her hand rose to grasp his.

"I'm not speaking about *telling someone*—"

In the hut, there still remained the camp bed which the scribe had used. Light the lantern, look at one another.

"What if somebody comes?"

"Shut the hatch to the stairs. Drag the chart box over it."

When Jon returned, he said:

"Your breasts are black, Astrid. Your belly is black, and your legs. The shadows are bright." He must find her, almost, by feel.

In the subsequent moment of climax she *saw*—for just a moment—his body as black, and her own body likewise.

Why should Tycho bother to climb all those stairs?

Over the next few weeks, as their bodies grew accustomed to one another's rhythms, Astrid could see the reversal for five to ten seconds.

As the days grew longer, dark windows of opportunity shrank and shrank. Astrid yearned for autumn, though not for winter when the hut

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would be too cold, and a brazier lit inside would only make the icy air foul to breathe.

Tycho never discovered about the reversal of vision. He never realized that there was *that* secret to find. What he found, mounting on impulse to the tower top one night early the following spring, and hurling the hatch open by force of words and muscle, was Astrid and Jon together inside the hut, hastening to dress—and rage clouded any insight Tycho might have had.

The weather had suddenly turned mild. Much snow remained to melt from the countryside. This had been the first love-making for months.

Throughout the winter Jon had shown his patron progress on the new map of the constellations. Jon was forever amending, making alterations, even beginning again from scratch. This didn't vex Tycho. The continuing presence of a dedicated man of science was a moderating factor in the castle.

Two lovers in disarray were quite a different matter.

Astrid must watch Jon stand stock-still and stare from the parapet into the night. And *stare.*

Jon needed those eyes of his; or else he would be nothing.

And now they bulged and swelled—

—until they burst.

Tycho released him from the sway. Jon collapsed screaming, more liquid upon his cheeks than any tears could have brought.

Tycho bespoke Jon to leave, to stumble down stairs and more stairs—wood, then stone—and to find his way by memory to the gate. The tyrant stalked him, whistling mischievous directions and misdirections as though Jon was a dog.

Astrid had followed part of the way downstairs. Now she fled back again up to the top of the tower. She took the oil lantern and set fire to all those charts—as if this brief beacon might somehow guide Jon away from Castle Cammon and through the town.

She contemplated the plunge, to ease her own anguish, and maybe forestall Tycho from forcing her to hang by her fingers from the bridge between the towers for as long as she could.

Two things saved her. One was that when Cammon came for her, to haul her downstairs, he was as distraught as if he had thrown an amulet of sanity into the river and had just realized what he had done.

The other was the Dowager Dame. A servant had told her maid what was happening; the maid told her mistress.

"So our astronomer's gone away!" declared the Dowager Lady. "If I'd known, I'd have packed a fish and fat pork pastie for him, and some clabbered milk—"

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It was as if the loss of Jon Kelpo's eyes was of less consequence than him setting out on a journey without any food.

Tycho gaped at his mother. He howled. He fled to his own chamber, leaving Astrid alone with the Dowager.

"Would *you* like a pastie?" Tycho's mother asked Astrid. "I don't think you're very welcome here now! You'd better go to the tinsmith's in town. Mr. Lindblad. He's an easy sort of man. Then start walking home tomorrow—if you can. I'm sure I don't know if you can. You can always try to force yourself. Lindblad'll give you a pastie, although it won't be a patch on mine. Kallio Keep's quite a way. Go as you are. Don't dare take any gifts my son has given you."

The one gift Astrid cared about remained in the hut: her birthday puzzle in its pouch. It would be sheer madness to climb the tower again. She must catch up with Jon. She must find him.

The Dowager's word was enough to allow Astrid through the gate.

Melting snow was a mess of jumbled distorted footprints of people and animals. Search as she might, halloo as she might, Astrid couldn't come across her lover on the road to town or anywhere in the town. Jon might have missed his way and tumbled blindly into the river, treacherous with ice rushing by, bobbing on spate. He may have circled round deliberately and drowned himself.

It must have been two in the morning when Astrid found her way to the tinsmith's house, shivering convulsively and escorted by a night watchman, who banged on the door with his cudgel.

She knew she wouldn't go back to Kallio Keep. Wouldn't, couldn't. She felt in her bones and her waters that if she did so she would act like a whore in her dad's town, and that Anniki would spit in her face.

"So you came here instead," Bosco said to Astrid, "where at least your problem gives you an occupation. A livin', you might say."

The naked woman, perched on the stool, turned to him. Daylight was already reasserting itself.

"The man-sway has faded," she whispered. "The sway to love men: I felt it fade while I was telling you."

She had unburdened herself. The cuckoo on her breast had cackled, and the pressure was gone.

"Did you see me as white, earlier on tonight?" Bosco asked her. "Do you see all your sailors as white?"

"I saw them all as Jon," she whispered.

"I felt responsible," Bosco told young Andrew, who lay in the upper bunk, propped on his elbow. Other sailors in the fo'c'sle were all ears, of course. The four-masted hermaphrodite schooner rolled gently as it

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sailed through a luminous night that was so easy on the men of the watch up on deck. The *Conga*'s creaks and groans were as familiar and friendly as the chirping of crickets in a clove field back home.

An incredulous voice said, "*That's* why you paid for her ticket? Her, with all that nest egg she bin earning!"

"Ah. I forgot to mention. What she didn't need for immediate use she bin sendin' to her home town as charity for the mana-priest to dole out. Sort of in recompense for herself and her dad shuttin' themselves up in their keep while Tycho Cammon made free."

"An' you seriously don't plan on sneakin' into that little cubby-cabin of hers?"

"She don't need that now. She wouldn't want it. After we dock, I'm goin' to fix her a job in a puzzle workshop. She'll learn how to make really neat puzzles to take northerners' minds off more dangerous manias. An' I hope she might find herself a girlfriend among all them nimble-fingered puzzle-makers."

"What a soft touch you are, Bosco! Sounds as though you've been bespoken, yourself."

"Mebbe I *have* been," admitted Bosco. "Just a bit, on the shortest night." ●

We appreciate comments about the magazine, and would like to hear from more of our readers. Editorial correspondence should include the writer's name and mailing address, even if you use e-mail. Letters can be e-mailed to 71154.662@compuserve.com or posted to Letters to the Editor, *Asimov's*, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, N.Y. 10020. Letters may be shortened and edited for publication. The e-mail address is for editorial correspondence *only*—questions about subscriptions should be directed to Box 54625, Boulder, CO 80322-4625.

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Lawrence Person

The fusion of physics and religion takes an unexpected turn in Lawrence Person's . . .

CRUCIFIXION VARIATIONS

Illustration by Shirley Chan

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I was in charge of the Jerusalem Project because I loved administration more than physics. Philip Morley destroyed my world because he loved physics less than God.

I was performing that quintessential university administrative duty, filling out grant proposals, when Phil burst into my office with the news.

"We've got it!" he said. The expression on his face was one of absolute, rapturous joy, almost frightening in its intensity. "I've found Him!"

Him. There was no mistaking the capital letter in his voice.

Phil had documented the existence of Jesus Christ.

It was the culmination of three years, five hundred thousand man-hours, and several million dollars' worth of research. It was the single most important achievement in physics since the initial decoding of sub-quark event waves, and the most important historical discovery since—well, *ever*. In short, it was the sort of once-in-a-lifetime breakthrough that would crown our careers and make Phil and me famous for the rest of our lives. I should have been ecstatic at the news.

Which I would have been, except that I'm an atheist.

Philip Morley was my polar opposite in almost everything: passionate, hot-tempered, blunt, stubborn, lively. A devout Christian—a evangelical Baptist no less—Phil was a double shock for someone who had always thought of evangelicals as white trash in bad polyester suits.

He was also a genius.

Within the exalted intellectual confines of my profession, I have known exactly three geniuses on a first-name basis. One was a Nobel Prize winner, the other Dean of Sciences at a major university at age forty-three. The third was Phil. The sheer power of his intellect was a source of both wonderment and envy to me, since I had long ago reconciled myself to the fact that, as a particle physicist, I was a hopeless mediocrity.

At one time that revelation would have pained me. Like so many of my compatriots, I had come into the field an intellectual virgin, bursting with enthusiasm and painfully naïve. I saw myself as a Heroic Scientist, marching in lockstep with Einstein and Hawking to do battle with the universe and wrest from it answers to the Big Questions.

But that was before slamming into the wall of my own intellectual limitations, before realizing I was merely smart in a field overburdened with brilliance. In a profession where most important work is done before you're forty, I was painfully aware of my status as an also-ran. After that brutal realization I kicked around for a while, just good enough to land a succession of non-tenure-track assistant professor posts as the academic equivalent of a migrant farmworker. In all likelihood I would have spent the remainder of my days teaching freshman physics at community colleges had not events intervened.

An old undergraduate roommate had become one of the field's leading

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lights, landing a hot, hard-money project at a major university, and since it involved my dissertation subject he used his pull to get me on the team. Even then I might never have heard of the Jerusalem Project had not that same friend's premature stroke resulted in my promotion, at which point I discovered my talent for running people far exceeded that of running a phased sub-quark collision chamber.

Those that can, do; those that can't, teach; and those that can't teach, administrate. I thought that rather funny when I first saw it taped amidst a cluster of cartoons on my faculty advisor's office door. Once I fell victim to it I found the joke was on me.

Still, you learn to enjoy the things you do well. I found I could write reports, balance budgets and court potential donors with polished ease. My initial project was finished on time and under budget, producing more than two dozen papers for the researchers and grad students involved—including just enough with my name as co-author to satisfy my publish-or-perish requirements for the next decade. My initial success led to being put in charge of a second project, and then a third, each another feather in my administrative cap.

Listen to any successful science administrator long enough and you'll hear a chorus of frustrated sighs about the paperwork morass keeping them from their first and only true love: pure research. "Oh, if only I could get away from my desk and get back into the lab," they opine, "I'd be a happy (gender specific noun here)." A few of them, the ones who had actually done important research in their youths, even believe it. I make the same noises myself now and then, but only to maintain the image.

In truth, the siren song of fundamental research no longer carries any allure. Been there, done that, and I'm better at pushing papers. I've finally found a position where mediocrity is a virtue.

Not that I'm bitter.

Really.

After all, I have precious little reason to be. I earn a high salary, live a good life, and am quite comfortable basking in the glow of reflected glory. Years of personal turmoil leave you with a distinct appreciation for stability.

As an ex-alcoholic, Phil was another great fan of stability. By his own admission he had spent two hard years drowning himself in a bottle before grabbing Jesus as his life-preserver. It was Phil's brutal honesty about those years that had finally convinced me to hire him despite his spotty record—and his religion.

Phil's work had been impressive for the first twelve years of his post-doctoral career, downright shoddy during his two on the bottle, and finally ground-breaking during the five since recovery. But as good as his research record was, it couldn't hide the fact that most of his colleagues

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thought he had an ego the size of Canada. "Brilliant researcher, fucked-up human being," was one colleague's blunt assessment.

Worse still, Phil wasn't just a Christian, he was an *aggressive* Christian. At his old position, he had frequently precipitated shouting matches over such less-than-current events as original sin and biblical inerrancy. For a confirmed atheist, a physicist who talked about Jesus and redemption with the same matter-of-fact confidence he discussed quarks and leptons was at the very least an annoyance, and at worst an actual danger. Bible-quoting fundamentalists were fine for bankrolling the athletic department's slush fund, but a tangible menace when evangelizing unwilling colleagues. The last thing I wanted was some wild-eyed fanatic proselytizing the grad students.

I had discovered Phil's distinctively mixed record when first reviewing applications for the Jerusalem Project's Head Researcher. With his negatives in mind, I had shuffled Phil's folder beneath the six other qualified candidates, where it had stayed until, late one sleepless evening, I had finished everyone else's relevant papers and started in on Phil's.

Unless you speak math, explaining how and why Phil's work was light-years beyond anyone else's would be impossible. In fact, there were parts of it I had a tough time sledding through myself, pages where the text was all but lost amidst bristling fortresses of difficult sub-quantum phase-change equations. But after digesting it, I was convinced of two things: Philip Morley was twice as smart and qualified as anyone else for the job, and, if I read his equations correctly, he could cut six months to a year off the project's scheduled completion date.

Which left me with a problem.

Genius was all well and good—in its place. Some of physics' smartest minds are also among its more congenial personalities, and such blessed individuals are a true pleasure to work with. But the sort of genius that didn't give a flying fuck about anything outside its own peculiar intellectual orbit was a royal pain in the ass. Give me a mediocre but solid researcher over a prima donna any day. Shaving six to twelve months off a project meant nothing if it was going to take ten years off my life.

And finally, of course, it comes back to religion. Despite my protestations of cheerful tolerance, I took a secret, perverse pleasure in undertaking the Jerusalem Project merely for the opportunity to be there when it failed.

And that's why I hesitated to hire Phil. What if he disproved the existence of Jesus and refused to admit it? What if he refused to certify the results, or insisted on rerunning the experiment until he succeeded? What if he tried to falsify the results, to cook the books in order to avoid facing up to the fact that the religion which had saved his life was a hollow lie?

I never seriously contemplated his actually succeeding. I had long re-

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garded Christian dogma as a mishmash of romanticized fraud, improbable fantasy and maudlin sentimentality. It was a two thousand-year-old con game designed to keep the priestly class in wine and women without forcing them to soil their hands performing real work. The idea that such Luddite absurdities as "scientific creationism" drew their inspiration from fact was something I considered beyond the realm of possibility.

Unable to resolve this mental conundrum, I finally decided to meet Phil in person. That way I could see if he acted as bright as his papers or as dumb as his reputation.

When I stepped into the lab, the holotank depicted a single man standing on a stone ledge, stunted bushes and trees peeking up through the rocks behind him. In front a small crowd, perhaps as many as a hundred, stood watching him speak.

"There," said Phil softly, pointing, his smile still wide.

He looked little like standard portraits of Jesus. His skin and hair were darker than usually depicted, the later unkempt save where it was bound by two metal bands. His face had a definite Semitic cast to it, close to that of modern Arabs, but with distinctly African lips. His clothes more closely resembled Roman tunics of the period than the flowing robes he was usually shown in. But the eyes . . .

The eyes were intense, mesmeric—more like the eyes of a charismatic demagogue, an Adolf Hitler or Charles Manson, than a beatific messiah. But they *were* the eyes of an extraordinary man, and for the first time I began to consider the possibility that Phil might actually have succeeded.

"How do you know?"

"Listen. Ruth, continue tracing this wave, but skip back about fifteen minutes and run the image on the tank."

At Phil's command, the scene flickered, then came to life. The man on the ledge spoke with great power and conviction in a strange language I didn't understand. Every now and then a wash of static would break up the image, but Phil's phase-change algorithms had reduced interference far below that of any other first-century re-creation I had ever witnessed.

"What's he saying?"

"That's Aramaic. Ruth, bring up Dr. Silver's program and run a concurrent translation." At Phil's command, the Aramaic speech faded to a whisper and an English translation came up in its stead.

". . . insult you, beat you, despise you, and libel you because of me, you should rejoice! Because your reward isn't here, not in this barren desert, not this world of dirt and stone. Like the prophets that came before and foretold my coming, your reward is in the kingdom of Heaven!"

"The Sermon on the Mount," whispered Phil, his voice filled with awe. I turned from the holotank to stare at him, and saw tears—I could only assume of joy—running down his face.

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"I guess we should tell the sponsors," I said.

"No, not yet. I want to track the wave phase through to the end. Within the month we should be able to hand them everything."

We were silent a long moment. "Well, Phil, I guess you've done it," I offered lamely, feeling numb. "I guess I should buy you a drink."

At that Phil laughed uproariously, as though trying to release all the joy in his body at once. Then he did something he'd never done before—gripped me in a bear hug so strong it lifted me off the floor, his tears wetting my cheek.

"Make it a Diet Coke, buddy," he said, laughing and weeping at the same time, "make it a Diet Coke."

How and why sub-quark wave events are captured and read, how they let us view the past, and why they show us only *possible* pasts, is difficult to explain. So instead of a technical lecture, I'm going to engage in what popular-science journalists call "oversimplification." In academia, we call this "lying."

In the menagerie of sub-quark beasties discovered by Daniels and Chung in 2007, E-particles are the ones of immediate concern. Like their more exotic brethren, E-particles are hellishly difficult to create from scratch (at least for those of us without a hundred-trillion-electron-volt supercollider in our basement), but very easy to "breed" once you've created them. Because they're among the most basic and ubiquitous of sub-quark particles, in theory (and here's where the lying comes in) every E-particle is not only connected to every other E-particle, but with every other sub-quark particle as well.

That connection exists not only in the here and now, but also throughout the entire length of an E-particle's existence. Since the amount of sub-quantum "energy" carried by an E-particle declines very, very slowly over a long period of time, we use a process based on complex energy-transfer models to trace E-particle energy loss back through history, and once you've learned how to properly model, manipulate, and record E-particle energy states at that specified time, it is possible to "see" the past via a computer re-creation based on E-particle positions.

Or, rather, a *possible* past.

Now, here's where it gets tricky. Because event waves are extracted using huge amounts of computer processing power, and because quantum effects make it impossible to eliminate every last variant in event wave re-creations, there is no guarantee that the event recorded actually occurred as depicted in the computer simulation. This inability to distinguish between "true" and "false" pasts is both unavoidable and gets worse the closer to the present you get, where the signal-to-noise ratio goes so overwhelmingly negative that no amount of processing power is capable of resolving event waves into a coherent picture. The technical

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word we use for this noise is "fuzzing," and once you get past the thirteenth century or so AD, everything is pretty much hopelessly fuzzed out.

Irving Weintraub explains how and why this is true (in layman's terms) in his book *The Disappearing Greek: Sub-Quantum Event Waves and the Recording of History*. In the book's title case, a physics team resolved an event wave depicting a minor skirmish from the Peloponnesian War. The computer re-creation showed two soldiers being killed, then buried, next to a prominent rock outcropping about forty miles inland of the Aegean coast. Well, it so happens that this outcropping still exists, and when an archaeological expedition was sent out to examine the site—*voila!*—the remains of a Greek soldier, one of the two depicted by the computer (down to his good-luck necklace and the dents in his armor) were dug up. But, here's the kicker: despite the event wave depiction showing both of them being buried side by side in the same grave, *there was absolutely no sign of his companion, or of the site being disturbed since the original interment.* The computer re-creation had displayed a previously unknown and verifiable historical event, but one that had not occurred as the computer had depicted it.

Well, these results were strange enough that they ran the event wave resolution again, and this time, *three* soldiers died. Further runs produced variations on the same results: the same event was depicted over and over again, but the details varied every time, a pattern that has surfaced in every multi-run event wave resolution. The reasons for this are still hotly debated, the most popular viewpoint being the "many worlds" theory of sub-quantum division, that every wave event depicts history as it occurred in an "alternate reality" that split off from our own at the instant of the event's occurrence. A few theorists (with a tip of the hat to Heisenberg, Von Neumann, and Schrödinger) have even gone so far as to postulate a new sub-quark uncertainty principle for event waves. According to them, we'll never be able to resolve an event wave that truly depicts our own past, since any "true" event is altered by its very viewing.

However, even though event wave depictions are not strictly "true," all those we are able to view follow known history to the letter—indeed, on a scale of centuries, the differences are essentially arbitrary. No one has recorded an event wave where Alexander the Great was never born, or where Rome lost its war against Carthage, or where the pyramids were never built. In the greater scheme of things, event wave depictions diverge from our own reality only by minute degrees of arc, which makes E-particle wave research a historiographic tool of immense power.

And that was why the Christian Research Council approached us about the Jerusalem Project. At first I wasn't terribly interested—until they were willing to put up ten million dollars in backing, no strings attached. We would direct and conduct all research, their involvement

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strictly limited to bankrolling the project and receiving progress reports. They had agreed to those conditions readily enough, believing it would make their case that much stronger when (that was the word they always used, "when") we came up with proof for the existence of Christ.

Which led directly to another aspect of the "Phil Problem." Given that independence, I was very hesitant to turn the project over to someone whose loyalty to the sponsors (or at least their goals) was stronger than that to the university. I needed a hard-working drone, not a crusading zealot.

All of this was on my mind as I called Phil up to arrange the interview.

After the initial breakthrough, progress on the Jerusalem Project proceeded at a steady clip. The wave event held steady without fuzzing out, eliminating the necessity of reacquiring a trace fix. Over the next month, Phil all but lived in the lab as he captured Jesus' last few weeks of life. Despite his self-imposed sixteen hour workdays, he seemed bursting with energy and enthusiasm, in the grip of an excitement that bordered on mania. He was all smiles whenever I dropped by the lab, despite the dark circles under his eyes.

"The entrance to Jerusalem," he said one day when I looked in, inclining his head toward the holotank. There Jesus, looking as ragged and dirty as any first-century traveler, rode a donkey down the middle of a broad street. All around him a crowd cheered and shouted in a hundred different voices, too many for the computer to translate.

" 'When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred,' " Phil quoted.

"Do you want a day or two off? You've been working two weeks without rest. Let Mark or one of the other grad students cover things for awhile. You look dead tired."

Phil shook his head, smiling. "Maybe later, but not now, not with the wave reaching Passion week. I'm going to see it through to the end."

"All the way to the crucifixion, eh?"

Phil shook his head again. "No. All the way through to the Resurrection."

I rolled my eyes. "Of course. Stupid of me. That's what I meant."

"You still don't believe, do you?"

"Believe what? That Jesus lived? That the Bible is literal truth and the word of God?"

"The Resurrection. That Jesus not only lived, but was sent to earth to redeem mankind's sins."

I shrugged. "Right now, I don't know what I believe. A few weeks ago I didn't believe Jesus existed at all."

"So if I give you proof of his Resurrection, you'll believe?"

I laughed. "Well, then I won't really have any choice, will I?"

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He nodded, obviously figuring that this was as much of an admission as he would get out of me. "All right, then. Give me about five days, and I'll have your proof."

As I walked away, I mulled over the flip side of that equation, the question that lay unasked between us: *And if Jesus doesn't rise, will you admit that your religion was founded on a lie?*

When I finally met Phil in person, I saw immediately that our brief vidconference had not done justice to his impeccable sense of style. He looked more like a Wall Street stockbroker than a particle physicist, wearing a three-piece, charcoal pinstripe Armani suit with razor-sharp lapels, a starched white shirt and a red silk power-tie. I had put on my best suit for the occasion, but it was a shabby, shapeless thing next to Phil's sartorial splendor.

"Dr. Morley, I'm Richard Lasman. It's a pleasure to met you in person," I said, extending my hand.

"Likewise," he said, shaking firmly. "You have a lovely campus here. Lots of trees and open space."

"We're lucky. The founders picked a spot far enough from downtown that we're still in the suburbs. Please, come in and sit down. Can I get you anything to drink?"

"Some ice water would be nice."

I had my office assistant fetch his drink while we exchanged pleasantries. We talked about a few mutual acquaintances (all of whom had guardedly voiced the same mixed feelings about Phil), then got down to business.

We talked about technical aspects of the project for roughly thirty minutes, and any lingering doubts I had about his intelligence and expertise vanished. A couple of times he was so far over my head that I had to have him "laymanize" things for me. Not only was he the best candidate among all the applicants I had received, he might have been the best in the world at developing phase signal resolution techniques. I was truly impressed and told him so. He was obviously pleased, but maintained the same calm, smiling demeanor he had exhibited during the entire interview.

But it was time to bring up less pleasant matters.

"Well, so much for the technical aspects," I said. "But there are a few other things I need to know."

"Ask away."

"Well, one of the things I'm concerned about . . ." I began, then trailed off, shuffling through papers as I looked for some way to broach the subject delicately. I didn't find one.

"I understand you had a drinking problem," I said bluntly.

"Oh, that's putting it mildly," said Phil, still calm. "It was more than a problem. I was a drunk. A violent drunk."

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"Violent?" I asked stupidly, somewhat dazed at this straightforward confession.

Phil nodded, still calm and controlled, but all trace of his smile gone. "Dr. Lasman, I put my wife in the hospital, twice. Once with a concussion, once with a broken arm from when I threw her down our stairway. I just thank God we didn't have any children then, because I would have beaten them too."

I sat in silence, too stunned to speak.

"As you probably know, I got into a couple of fights with other faculty members there at USC." Actually, I had only known of one. "I was drinking half a bottle of bourbon before lunch, calling in sick every other day and had three DWI arrests before they pulled my license. The university was getting ready for hearings to revoke my tenure. I had probably sunken about as low as you possibly can without killing someone." He stopped talking and shook his head, looking at my stricken expression. "I'm sorry, I seem to have dumped an awful lot on you all at once."

"Oh no, it's just—well, after all, I did ask." I let out a short, nervous laugh. "I certainly can't accuse you of holding anything back. You deserve a lot of credit for recovering from something like that."

"No, Dr. Lasman, what I *deserve* is to be dead. What I *deserve* is to be burning in Hell right now for what I did to my wife and friends. And I certainly didn't deserve to have her stick by me like she did for those two years, doing everything she could to pull me back from the abyss. But from where I had sunken to, neither she nor any other human being could help me." Now it was his turn to let out a short, low laugh. "I've heard it said that justice is what we deserve, but mercy is what we want. Well, I ended up getting mercy instead of justice. And I pray to Jesus Christ every day for giving me that mercy, and I'll say that prayer every day to the day I die and it still won't be enough. I'm a very lucky man, Dr. Lasman, and I work hard never to forget that."

"And how long have you been . . . recovered?"

"Since March 17, 2012."

"That's pretty specific."

"It's not something you forget."

"Was that your first AA meeting?"

"No, not exactly. Something a lot more personal." He looked down at the floor. "Dr. Lasman, when I quit drinking, one of the things I swore off was lying. Lying for any reason. I always do my utmost to tell the truth, no matter what the consequences. So I'm quite aware that what I'm about to say may cost me my chance at heading the Jerusalem Project. I stopped drinking because I had a religious experience. A vision, in fact."

"Okay," I said carefully. "If you don't want to talk about it. . . ."

"No, I think it's important for you to know." He took a deep breath and stared off into the distance. "I had just come home. It was just after ten

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P.M. and I was even drunker than usual. My driver's license had been taken away six months before, so I had staggered home on foot from a tiny hole-in-the-wall bar some ten blocks from my house. After a few minutes I managed to unlock the front door and stagger inside. I made it halfway up the stairway—the same stairway I had thrown my wife down—when I tripped and fell. I landed sprawled out flat on my back at the foot of the stairs.

"While I was lying there, I felt myself—my spirit—lifted up, and a moment later I was next to my unconscious body. I remember standing there, looking at myself—looking at my uncombed hair and the stains on my jacket, watching a thin trickle of blood seep out of the edge of my mouth. Then I heard someone call my name, and when I looked my house was gone.

"I was standing in the middle of a vast, dimly lit plain, the sky an odd shade of purple, no sun or stars visible. I heard the same voice call my name again, and I turned to see a man in a hooded robe standing by a riverside. I walked over to him and asked who he was and why I was there. And that's when he pulled back the hood, and I saw it was Jesus Christ."

I was silent, struggling to keep my face impassive as I watched Phil tell his story and stare off into the distance. Whether it was true or not, I could certainly tell that *he* believed it was true.

"He didn't answer me at first, but merely pointed to the river. I looked down and saw that it was a river of blood. There were hundreds, maybe thousands of bodies in the river, all floating face down.

" 'This,' He said, 'is your future. This is the endpoint of the path you walk.' I started to ask Him what He meant, but just then a great wind came sweeping down the plain, drowning out my words.

" 'Remember,' He said, and then His body was suffused with a blinding white light.

"Just then I came to, stone cold sober, at the foot of the stairs. It was already morning outside." He sighed and shifted in his seat. "Well, since then I haven't had a single drink. I spent the next two weeks reading the Bible and apologizing to my wife, my co-workers, and everyone else I had wronged during my binges. Jesus Christ changed my life. It's as simple as that."

I sat there silent for a long moment, not knowing what to say. What could I say? Though I knew he thought he was telling the truth, I didn't for a moment believe that he had received an actual vision from God Almighty. Alcoholics saw all sorts of things in the grip of delirium tremors. What was I supposed to tell him? The vision that had changed his life was merely a particularly vivid case of the DTs?

No. Instead what I said was: "That's quite a story."

"No story, just the truth, as hard as it may be to believe. Dr. Lasman,

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I've talked with some of your colleagues here and I know that you're not a Christian. That doesn't bother me. The state of one's soul is a personal matter, and I wouldn't presume to judge another man. 'Judge not, lest ye be judged.' But if swearing on the Bible isn't enough, I give you my solemn word as a scientist that I haven't had a single drink since that day."

"I believe you," I said truthfully. "Of course, the university will want documented proof of your recovery."

Phil nodded. "I have random drug test records for that entire period, at least once a month, showing that I've been clean and sober the entire time."

"I'd like to get a copy of that. Not that I don't believe you, but the Federal Drug Rehabilitation Act requires us to keep the paperwork on file."

After that we discussed various casual, unimportant things: politics, the weather, football. I bid him goodbye and promised to get in touch as soon as we made a hiring decision. When he left my head was still spinning from what he had said, though not for the reasons you might expect.

Next to his confession, I suddenly felt *inadequate*. During my early years as a scientist, I thought I had been searching for Truth—and when I thought about it, it was always with a capital letter. Truth was the first thing that had led me to physics—and, not coincidentally, atheism.

When I set my sights on physics, religion was one of the first things I gave up. After all, how could I look for Truth when a fundamental part of my worldview was based on a lie? How could I dare to pull back its veil of mysteries when I cloaked my own fears in such threadbare robes? No, I had to strip off the comforting lies of God and the afterlife, of Christ and the soul. Only when I was naked of such deceptions could I approach Truth on equal terms.

But after my meeting with Phil, I was shocked to find my commitment so hollow. Where once I had held Truth above all else, my own life was now a tapestry of shabby lies. Each disillusionment, each compromise, each falsehood I had to commit in order to climb the administrative ladder, was a thread in that tapestry.

In short, Phil had shamed me. Here was a devout Christian, a fervent believer in the most threadbare and shabby mass of lies known to man, and yet he still found the courage to relate his wrenching personal tragedy with the absolute truth I had lost.

It was that, along with his scientific ability, that finally made me hire him.

Until he succeeded, I never had cause to regret it.

As Phil continued to capture Christ's wave event, I was going through a very different kind of intellectual crisis. During that time I had not yet abandoned my atheism, merely retreated with it to higher, more intellectually defensible ground. Obviously, Jesus of Nazareth had lived, and

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preached, much as was described in the Bible. But just because he had lived did not mean he was divine.

For those few weeks it seemed entirely possible that Jesus *thought* he was God, or the son of God, or whichever grade of hair-splitting distinction Christian theologians use to categorize divinity. True, almost all the recorded miracles (the loaves and fishes, the raising of Lazarus, etc.) occurred before Phil's entry point into the wave event. But after the crucifixion, I thought our messiah would turn out to be just another corpse.

I quickly found out how wrong I was.

After lunch on Friday afternoon, Phil called me in to watch the crucifixion.

Though mostly forgotten now, Millennialism was a huge cultural phenomenon around the turn of the century. Every Easter or Christmas, it was hard to turn on the television without half the channels showing "docudramas" based on the life of Jesus. Save for the shape of the cross (it was actually a T-shape, and Jesus only carried the cross-piece rather than the entire thing), the scene that unfolded was almost exactly like the ones I had seen on TV. The crown of thorns, the darkened sky, the "forgive them, Father, they don't know what they're doing" (Dr. Silver's translation program was relentlessly modern, though I think Phil missed the poetry of King James) were all there. I was somewhat shocked at how close the actual event was to its multiple media reenactments, though six hours of real time event wave depiction wasn't exactly designed for winning sweeps week.

I only watched the first and last half-hours, spending the rest of the day checking in every now and then while I buried myself in administrative work—a futile attempt to avoid thinking about the passion play unfolding in the lab. It was a fittingly ironic gesture. History was being made a few hundred feet away and I preferred shuffling papers.

Come 7:30 that night, I was still in my office, filling out next week's paperwork in a vain attempt to keep from thinking, when Phil called.

"Richard, can you come here? There's something I want you to see."

When I got to the lab, the holotank's murky image could barely be discerned.

"What is it?"

"The tomb where they laid out Jesus. Ruth, do an artificial light enhancement of two hundred percent."

The image brightened, and now I could clearly see a shrouded body laid out on a stone slab. "This is three hours and eight minutes after His death on the cross."

"Okay," I said neutrally.

"Watch. Ruth, eliminate artificial light enhancement and run the recreation from the stop point."

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For fifteen or twenty seconds there was nothing to see except a few flickering bands of fuzz. Then, just as I was about to ask Phil what I was supposed to see, it started.

For a moment it seemed as if fireflies had somehow gotten into the tomb. Several tiny specks of light appeared and started to fly in circles around the body. Over the next few seconds their numbers grew, until there were hundreds of them, each glowing brighter and brighter. The light became so intense that I started to bring my hands up to shield my eyes, but just then the brightness reached its peak, then abruptly disappeared. This time I didn't need any light enhancement to tell me the tomb was empty.

"I think it's safe to call that Transfiguration," said Phil, a broad smile on his face, utterly calm, utterly at peace.

My mind was anything but. I felt like I was drowning in unfathomable metaphysical seas, my careful, logical denial of Christ's divinity shattered, my worldview lying in ruins. Even today, what happened next is something of a blur. I remember talking about the project report, and Phil, down on his hands and knees, loudly offering a prayer of thanks, tears streaming down his face. But the exact words and actions of that night still elude my memory, almost as if I was stoned out of my mind or using powerful painkillers.

I left as soon as possible.

On the way home, I stopped by a bookstore and had them print out a King James Bible. I stayed up half the night reading it, feeling numb all over. The next morning I copied Phil's files to my home system and spent the weekend reviewing them, looking for signs of tampering or fraud. I didn't find any. Phil's record-keeping was meticulous and the data looked genuine.

By Sunday I had exhausted my store of plausible denial and finally started facing up to the awful truth. Jesus Christ had lived, preached, died, and been resurrected. Christianity, that silly, foolish religion I had taken such pride in scorning, was a more fundamental, bedrock truth than anything modern physics had ever discovered.

Making that admission wasn't easy. How do you continue your life after finding out everything you've ever known is wrong? I could almost believe it intellectually, but emotionally I was still in turmoil. I started making a mental list of the things in my life I would have to change. I was numb at the thought of learning how to pray. I even flipped through the Yellow Pages looking at listings for local churches.

Still, I thought I was coping remarkably well—calmly, rationally, logically. I thought the worst was over.

I was wrong.

I got in to work early Monday morning, intending to truly congratulate

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Phil, something I had failed to do in my numb state on Friday. My first sign that something was wrong was the broken glass.

Outside the lab hallway, a small forest of beer bottles shards lay shattered beneath the torn safety poster they had been hurled against.

Inside the lab things got worse.

In addition to more broken beer bottles, paper readouts were scattered across the lab floor amidst overturned chairs, one of our ancient computer terminals smashed against the wall. On the other side of the room I heard the slosh of a bottle and several quick intakes of breath.

I followed the sound until I found Phil sitting in a chair at the far end of the lab, drinking bourbon straight from the bottle, a three-day growth of beard on his cheeks, his hair and clothes disheveled. A cluster of empty liquor bottles was scattered around his feet, one marooned in a shallow pool of vomit. At the sound of my footsteps, he turned, bleary-eyed, to look at me.

"Oh look, Mr. Atheist is here," he said, "Good fucking deal."

"Phil?"

"Who fucking else," he said, then drank the rest of the bottle and hurled it against the far wall.

"All gone," he said. The smell of bourbon on his breath was almost overpowering. "If you want some you'll have to buy your own. Damn good thing they deliver, isn't it?"

"Phil, why are you doing this?"

Phil got up and staggered away. "Why'dya think?" he slurred, coming to rest leaning on the holotank. He turned and looked at me once again, his eyes seeming to focus for the first time.

"You weren't here then, were you?"

"When?"

"When I ran the second run," he said, caressing the holotank's steel backside. Then he started to cry.

"I didn't know," he said between sobs. "How could I have known?"

"Know what? What second run?"

"The second run!" he said, angry again, tears still falling down his cheeks.

"Phil, I don't understand what you're talking about. Please, try and calm down and tell me what happened."

Phil looked at me a moment, then whispered a soft "Oh God," and half slid, half collapsed to the floor, his back against the holotank.

"The first run fuzzed out. 'Bout a half hour after Jesus . . . after what you saw. What I showed you. The light . . . can you believe it? Four weeks of clear resolution, and then fuzz. Lost the trace. Nothing but goddamn fuzz. God-damned." He paused a moment. "Jesus fucking Christ, I need a drink."

"Okay, so the first run fuzzed out. What second run?"

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Phil looked at me a moment, then closed his eyes. "I did a second run. I used the first run data to refine the parameters, used the crucifixion as the entry vector. I wanted to see the Resurrection. I wanted to see Jesus rise from the dead.

"What happened?"

Phil opened his eyes again. "What happened? Not a goddamn thing happened. Not a goddamned thing." He staggered to his feet.

"Ruth!" he yelled. "Bring up the goddamned run."

"Dr. Morley, I'm not sure what you mean—"

"*Shut the fuck up you metallic whore!* Bring up the last run, the one that starts Friday night!"

The holotank brightened, and once again I saw Jesus on the cross.

"Advance . . . advance re-creation six hours."

Ruth complied and I saw them taking Jesus down.

"Advance another two."

Darkness.

"Enhance the light, two hundred percent."

Once again we looked at Christ's body in the tomb.

"There," said Phil, evidently satisfied. "There you are." He staggered away from the holotank.

"Okay, Phil, it looks like Jesus' body. What am I supposed to see?"

"That's just it," he said, rooting around through the bottles near his chair in search of one that wasn't empty.

I looked at Phil, then the holotank, then back at Phil again. "I still don't understand what—"

"THERE'S NO FUCKING RESURRECTION!" he screamed, throwing a whisky bottle that narrowly missed my head. "He just lays there! No light, no angels, no nothing!" At that he collapsed back into his chair, tears running down his cheeks again. "He's just a corpse," he said quietly, "just another fucking corpse."

It took a long moment for that to sink in. "You mean, we've got one wave proving Jesus is divine, and another proving he isn't?"

He nodded, looking as miserable as I've ever seen anyone look. "No divinity, no resurrection," he said, his voice dropping to a whisper. "No salvation."

I suddenly seized on an idea. "Phil, do you realize what we have here? We finally have a first-order variation, proof of a major alternate worldline. If we can follow this wave, document the subsequent absence of the Christian church, we can prove that—"

Phil started laughing, a low, bitter sound. "Look at the run. Do you know what the apostles do after they bury Jesus? Do you? They have a meeting and decide to go on preaching as if he had risen! Far better to start living a lie than admit you had lived one all along. They even convinced themselves it's what *he* would have wanted."

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At that I sat down in the chair across from him. "So there's no way to tell which run represented our world."

Phil nodded, letting out the same bitter laugh. "Fuck disappearing Greeks. We've got a disappearing Messiah."

Both of us were silent for a long moment, neither looking at the other. Finally, I got up and said, very quietly, "Well, Phil, I understand this is very hard for you. But it doesn't change the fact that all this was tremendous research. We're still going to be famous, despite the uncertainty involved—"

"Uncertainty?!?!" Phil yelled, grabbing a broken beer bottle and jumping unsteadily to his feet. "You call this uncertainty? Uncertainty's for sports, for stocks, for worries about your future! Uncertainty isn't for your basic relationship with the world! It isn't supposed to be about your soul! Uncertainty isn't about God's love!"

"Phil, calm down," I said, backing away. "Maybe there was a mistake with the run. Put the bottle down and take a few days off, and then we'll start again and see what the results are. We'll just live with the results we've—"

"I CAN'T LIVE IN A WORLD WHERE THE STATE OF MY SOUL IS SUBJECT TO QUANTUM MECHANICAL FLUCTUATION!" he screamed, madness in his face. Then he started to use the beer bottle.

I managed to get it away from him before he was able to slit his wrists.

And now, here, alone, I wonder if I'm any more capable of facing that uncertainty than Phil was. It's up to me to reveal our findings to the world.

Or not to.

One world of redemption, where salvation and eternal life are proven possibilities, proof of God's love. Another where God is silent and the afterlife no more than a comforting lie.

And no way to tell which is our own.

How can I reveal this to the world? That the most fundamental truth about our existence is not only unknown, but unknowable? That there's no way to know whether we're saved or damned?

What good can possibly come of such knowledge?

And what horrors will I be responsible for in unleashing it upon an unsuspecting world?

Without a Truth, *any* Truth, we're all alone in the dark.●

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COLONISTS

Money moved us and the lure
of money. Out we went
in our ice cocoons
past stars unnumbered
dreaming greedy dreams
of founding colonies.

Some said hope took us out,
new starts, new lives,
old failures left behind
but it was mostly greed
for fortunes rumored to be got
by fools as easily as the brave or wise.

We went
failed
died
and some
came back again
like shipping crates
full of deadly things
that sailed in us like ships,
dormant in their flesh cocoons
dreaming their greedy dreams
of founding colonies.

—William John Watkins

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Michael Kandel

WADING RIVER DOGS AND MORE

Michael Kandel occasionally translates science fiction from Polish (Stanislaw Lem's *The Cyberiad*), occasionally acquires science fiction for Harcourt Brace and Company (Kage Baker's *In the Garden of Iden*), and occasionally writes his own science fiction (*Panda Ray*, St. Martin's Press). He works as an editor at the Modern Language Association.

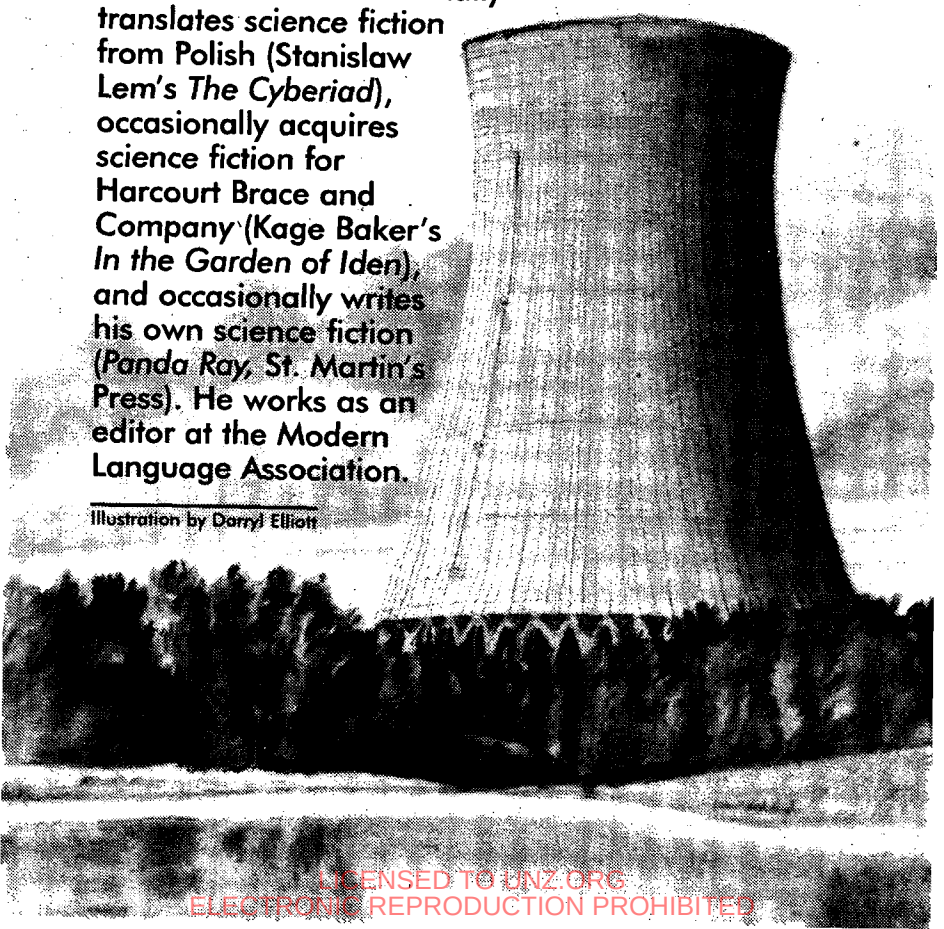

Illustration by Darryl Elliott

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First thing she says, "Where were you? Meatball threw up again last night, and Billy didn't show, no phone call or anything. I've had it with him, I am definitely reading him the riot act. Get the mop, now that you're here, and use some of that wintergreen too, the place stinks. Who's going to come in, with a stink like that?" I say, huffed up because of "Where were you?" like she's accusing me: "Excuse me, Susan? Do you have any idea how long it takes to get to the shop now with the em-effin traffic?" Susan doesn't like me to use language in the presence of the animals, she's funny that way, but when I'm in a bad mood sometimes, it's hard not to use a little language. The traffic has always been bad, it was bad when I was a kid, but hey, I'm sorry, this is a whole new ball of wax bad. I mean, it's the em-effin LIE out here these days, from all the tourists and government people and scientists coming to see the alien. Our little windy uphill-downhill roads on the North Shore just can't handle the cars and charter buses. I mean, I had to sit at Echo Avenue and Miller Place Road for half an hour because of the backup all the way to 25A. And there didn't even used to be a light there. I timed it: half an hour to go one lousy block. People are on their way to Shoreham, though the cops won't let you near it, not even near enough to use your binoculars, unless you have a VIP pass, or else people are on their way to Brookhaven Labs, where there are shows now like Epcot telling the public about the alien. Forget the East End, no one goes there anymore. It's one detour after another. From all the car fumes, sitting in that god-awful traffic, I came down with one of the worst headaches I ever had, that's the reason I'm in a mood today. I hate headaches more than colds or fevers. With me, a headache works its way into the center of the head and stays there all day.

Anyhow, after I say em-effin to Susan, I quiet down and behave myself. I know that if I give her any more lip than the em-effin, she'll give me ten times over and in spades. When she starts, you want to take cover. Susan's only five-two and I bet she doesn't weigh more than a hundred and ten, but don't anybody mess with her. Even her kids don't give her lip, and little Barry's in the eighth grade already and getting those adolescent zits on his face. I used to call him Barry-um, after the enema. Susan told me to stop, because he was calling himself that in school. But that was when he was in the fourth grade. He used to play with me then, but as a teenager he's ashamed of me. That's natural. Teenagers are ashamed of everything including themselves. My point, anyhow, is this: Ain't many eighth-graders who don't give their mother lip. Boys in particular.

So there I am mopping up after Meatball—poor thing, Meatball has his tail between his legs—when a guy comes in, and you can tell he's a scientist from his bad posture and the way he squints at everything. He makes a face because of the smell. Well, excuse me, Jack, but what do

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you expect a pet shop to smell like, even when we use wintergreen, Alpine freshener, and cedar chips? "Can you tell me how to get to Oscar's German Deli?" he asks. I tell him, while I'm mopping, that it used to be at the post office shopping center but now it's in that new mall where the peach farm was, on 25A after Rocky Point, but the peach farm isn't there anymore because they sold out and moved to Florida. A lot of people around here are doing that, moving to Florida, but it's not for me. The man doesn't know what I'm talking about. He says, "Is that a parrot?" Daisy's making a racket because she's excited. She always gets excited when I use the mop. Susan thinks she was abused as a kid parrot, but I can't imagine anybody hauling off and hitting a bird with a mop, can you? On the other hand, it's true there are a lot of crummy people in the world. Look at those Schmidts and what they did to their own little daughter, on the front page last week and in the eleven o'clock news. It was really disgusting. I must have read the story in *Newsday* ten times, and it made my stomach knot up and my hands sweat so bad, I don't even know what I had for supper.

"It's a parrot," I say. "I didn't know they were so loud," says the man. "That's how they talk," I say. The man says: "It would drive me up the wall." I shrug, meaning: Different strokes for different folks. "If he's talking, what's he saying?" asks the man then. You can tell he likes the parrot even though it would drive him up the wall if he had it in his house. People take to parrots, I think it's because parrots have more dog or cat in them than bird. "It's a she," I say as I wring out the mop head, "and she's saying a lot of things at the same time. First, she's saying that I'm using the mop again. Susan—that's the owner—thinks that someone bopped Daisy with a mop once. That's Susan's theory." The scientist smiles. I smile too and go on: "Me, I think that Daisy's just interested in the mop. Parrots are intelligent. They have the most IQ of all the birds. I read that somewhere, it might have been in an encyclopedia. Crows are intelligent, too, I grant you that, but they don't even come a close second. Some people think crows are smarter than parrots, but that's because they know zip about parrots. So my opinion is, Daisy here is just interested in the way the mop works, you know, with this handle when you squeeze it out? When I do that, she crooks her head and looks." She is crooking her head and looking right now, to show the man what I mean. Sometimes I think parrots understand every word we're saying.

I go on: "What else is she saying? That she wants a little excitement. She's telling us to let her out of the cage for a while, but we can't do that on account of the customers." "Oh, does she bite?" asks the scientist, looking at Daisy, respectful and interested. Daisy's looking back, but it's hard to say if she's interested in the scientist. "Bite? Not exactly. She nips a little," I say, "but parrots have these strong beaks on them, so a nip for them might be a bite for you, it might even draw blood, and Susan doesn't want

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lawsuits. Susan's careful about the shop. It's got to pay for her kids' college and she doesn't want anything happening, if you know what I mean."

"What else is Daisy saying?" asks the scientist with another smile. He's amused with me, but I don't mind. Not everyone amused with me means harm, I've learned that. I used to get huffed and hurt a lot, when I was younger, because I'm so sensitive, like I have radar. This guy squints and there's a nervous twitch sometimes under his left eye, but he doesn't mean any harm. If he meant harm, I'd know it by now. "Daisy's saying that you're a stranger," I say, "and not even from around here on the Island but out of state. Parrots have good ears, you know, they can pick up all kinds of things about you from your voice." "Well, she's right," says the scientist, "I'm from Washington, DC." "Oh," I say, "I bet you're one of those alien people. I figured that." He nods but with tired disgust, like someone who has to work on a weekend when everyone else gets to go to the beach. He says with a sigh, "Yes, I'm one of those alien people." "Some say it's green like peas," I say. "And others that it's green like spinach. So which is it, peas or spinach? I mean, if that's not classified." There was an argument about this subject at the bar only yesterday. It lasted more than an hour. I was keeping track of the time, because I knew it would be a long argument. The scientist says, frowning, as if he never considered the kind of green it was before: "I don't know. Maybe more peas than spinach." "No kidding," I say.

I'm pleased with myself, because I learned something important today, almost like finding money. I'll tell Joe this evening. Joe will be impressed that I found out something about the alien that he doesn't know. Joe's nuts about the alien, reads whatever he can find on the subject and talks about it until you wish he'd stop. I say to myself: You never can tell, Marty my boy, when you're going to learn something useful. Even while you're mopping up puke from a stupid Dalmatian—and they don't come any stupider than Meatball, that's why we call him Meatball, but even so he's not a bad dog and, frankly, I have to confess I like him better than most. Meatball's comfortable company, he knows how to be quiet, which is one of your most important things in a dog. Anyhow, to get back to what I was saying, even while you're mopping up puke in a pet shop you can learn something useful if you keep your ears open.

The scientist laughs. He has a thin, hardly noticeable laugh, more like a polite cough than a laugh. "You know, you could probably help us," he says. He is heading for the door now, I guess to ask at another shop where Oscar's German Deli is, but he isn't going to have any better luck, believe me. It's hard to give directions around here. There are no major roads. "We could use someone who understands the talk of other species," the scientist says, his hand on the door. "Anytime," I say, though I'm not a hundred percent sure what he means by other species. Does he mean

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the alien? Scientists don't think the way we do, they think technical, so the words they use may seem like normal words to us but mean things totally different. But I'm always ready to help people out, it's in my nature. If you ask me to help you, I put down what I'm doing right away. I was always like that, too. Not that I get much chance these days to do any helping out in Wading River, except with animals, of course. The guy leaves, and that's the end of our conversation.

Susan says, "Marty, use more wintergreen. I can still smell it." I pour the rest of the bottle in the mop water. I use so much of the em-effin stuff, it burns my throat and makes me sneeze. I sneeze twelve times, my nose running like a faucet. I count the sneezes, out loud. Susan says, "Will you please stop that?" One thing about a good string of sneezes, it helps your headache. It must clear some of the garbage out.

When I get home, Mrs. Piscopo has something to say to me. She taps on her dining room window after I park and as I walk up the side path past the scrub pines, that's how she lets me know. It's always three sharp taps. She must use a key or a piece of metal. Someday the glass will break, she taps so hard. So I go see what it's about instead of going upstairs to my room and making my supper. "Marty," she says when I come in, "there's a telegram for you." "Yeah?" I say, like I get telegrams every other day. Actually, I don't think I ever got a telegram once in my life. I'm trying to think who it could be, but I can't think of a soul. I'm thinking: It's not a death, because I don't have any family. Maybe it's some kind of good news. Maybe my luck will change. Mrs. Piscopo hands the telegram to me, and sure enough, I see through the little window in the orange envelope that it says Martin Bogaty. My heart does a funny beat. They even spelled my name right, which doesn't happen a lot, I can tell you. People spell it all kinds of ways: Buggaty, Bogatti, Bogarti, once Big Gotti. I open the envelope since it's mine to open. I never read one of these before, so it takes me a little time to figure out how it works. Mrs. Piscopo is impatient because she's nosy. She stands so close, I can smell her bathroom powder.

There's a lot of numbers and letters at the top of the telegram that don't make any sense. Finally I get to the words of the main message and piece them out. "Holy," I say when I read it. "Holy" is what I say when I'm really astounded. "What is it?" says Mrs. Piscopo. You can't blame her for being interested, all she does all day is watch television, make soup, and knit sweaters for her grandchildren, who have yellow skin and live on the other side of the world. "It says here I just won two million dollars in a sweepstakes. See, there's my name and there's the two million. Can you believe that?" I count the zeros again to make sure. "Don't believe it," says Mrs. Piscopo. "The same thing happened to my brother-in-law. It's just one of those advertisements to get you to buy real estate in a swamp." "With two million dollars, I could buy all the swamp I wanted,"

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I say. "Read the fine print," says Mrs. Piscopo, annoyed with me. "You'll see there's a catch somewhere, there always is. People don't give you money for no reason, Marty." I'm afraid she's right about that, because no one ever gave me money for no reason and I don't expect them to, but the telegram doesn't have any fine print that I can see, not even on the back, it just says I have to call an 800 number and go to some seminar thing at a Holiday Inn. I'm glad I didn't show a lot of excitement, because if I had, Mrs. Piscopo would be laughing at me now, and it's been a hard day. There's something heartless about her laugh, and it makes her look like a turtle too. I had a dream once about her: she was a turtle in a bowl, laughing.

I put the telegram in my pocket and start to go, but she tells me I have to clean the leaves out of the gutter on the front of the house because when it rained two days ago, she saw the water pouring again from the middle of the roof. I know better than to say, "Come on, can't I do it tomorrow, Mrs. Piscopo? I'm beat." I go get the ladder even though I'm beat and my head hurts. If I don't help every time she says, and first thing, she'll up the rent on me again, she's like that, and if she ups the rent again, that'll start cutting into my beer money, which I don't want to happen. I remember how rough it was at the Andersons'. I once went for three months there, I kid you not, without a beer because I had to budget. What a long winter that was. I marked off the days like I was in prison. I was so thirsty for a beer, a beer was all I could think about, an ice-cold Michelob. Michelob's my favorite. Beer gives you a gut, I know, but I say, so what, I don't have to worry about my waistline. It's not like I'm going to get into a bathing suit and go to the beach. It's not like I'm going to a ball.

So, even though it's getting dark, I climb up with a bucket and spend twenty minutes clearing wet leaves out of the front gutter. Some of them are half rotten, black and slimy. If Mrs. Piscopo got one of those mesh shields installed that kept out the leaves—you can buy them in aluminum or plastic—I wouldn't have to do this at all, but she won't pay a cent for anything more than she absolutely has to, like a lot of old people.

After supper I go to the bar to tell Joe about the alien being more like peas than spinach. I'm looking forward to that. I also bring along my telegram, so he can explain to me what the catch is in the two million dollars. Wading River has other bars—there's an Irish bar on North Country Road just before you get to the state park, there's Jerry's at the bottom of the hill between the music store and the laundry, and there's that fancy new one on 25A for rich fags—but I only go to this one. When you go to the same bar, you get to know all the people and all their jokes. I guess bars are like churches in that way. If you stay where everybody knows you, nobody gives you a hard time. Or almost nobody—I groan when I walk in, because, speaking of giving hard times, Dave is there,

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but I guess I should have expected it: this hasn't been a great day. Dave sees me and says, "Hey, everybody, it's Dog Man." "How you doing, Dave?" I say and take my usual seat at the end near the ice machine. Dave is my only real enemy. I've never done anything to him, but that's the way some people are, they can't stand the sight of you and there's nothing you can do about it. But I've learned this: If you don't show how much you mind, people like Dave get off your case after a while. They get bored with it.

"Marty," says Joe, clapping me on the shoulder. "Joe," I say, clapping him back. We always start off that way. "What's new?" says Joe. There's a lot new. He can probably see it written on my shit-eating grin of a face and that's why he's asking. "Well, you'll never guess," I say, wanting him to guess a little. Joe is one of the few people who treat me like a regular person. I think he's a great guy, in case you haven't figured that out. Actually, all the Joes I've known are good guys. Probably a coincidence. Carl puts a Michelob in front of me, because that's what I always have, a Michelob and a pretzel with extra salt. I take a slug. It's good. "One of those alien people came to the shop today, a scientist," I say, because I can't wait for Joe to guess, this is just too neat to hold on to. "You don't say," says Joe. "Yes, and I asked him, you know, about the color, whether it was peas or spinach, remember, when we were arguing? And the scientist said it was more like peas." But Joe's not really listening. I can't believe it. The news about the alien doesn't grab him, he just says, "No kidding." He's got something else on his mind. What a disappointment. It turns out that the Rangers lost and he's bothered also because of Jim Ahern's new contract. I don't even know who Jim Ahern is. Joe and Vinny start talking about the Stanley Cup, and they're both dissatisfied but for different reasons. This evening's going to be a bummer like the day was, I can see that. I don't follow the Rangers myself, I like football better. Hockey is too fast for me. You blink, and you don't know where the em-effin ball is. Where's the fun in that? Football takes its time, and if you miss anything, they play it back in slo-mo and at a lot of different angles.

Dave comes over and starts in. "So Dog Man's all excited about the green space man," he says, at my shoulder, and gets confidential or pretend-confidential. "You know what I think, Dog Man? You ought to go over there to Shoreham and have a heart-to-heart with him. I really do. Because you two have a lot in common, you and the alien. No, really. What do you have in common? You both like to talk, and no one can understand you." Dave laughs at his joke, and a couple of other guys laugh with him. I know they're laughing not because the joke is funny but because they don't want to get on Dave's shit list. He carries a gun, even though he doesn't have a permit. You can see it sometimes when he stretches. It's under his sweater, just above the belt. And he has that long mean-looking scar on his forehead, too, that goes up into his hair. No one

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in his right mind would want to get into a fight with Dave, not even Joe, who was in the Marines and is plenty tough. Joe doesn't take anything from anybody. But I can see I'd better keep the sweepstakes business to myself tonight. If Dave gets on to that, he won't let go of it.

I move over to Doc, who's hunched up at a table. "How's it going, Doc?" I say. He holds up a finger. Doc's always sick. For a while we were sure he was going to die, he was in the hospital for two months and had surgery a dozen times at least, but he keeps coming back somehow, even though he's all hunched over now. We call him Doc because he's seen more doctors than all the rest of us put together. "I ran into one of those alien people," I say, "and asked him about the color. I don't know if you were here when we were arguing about how green, whether it was peas or spinach." But I see the pained look on Doc's face, like he has gas, so I stop, say I'm sorry, get up, and leave him be. I go over to Howie, who's complaining about his wife and his car, and listen to him complain for a while. He likes it when you listen. I have another Michelob, then another after that, and try Joe again. Maybe he's finished talking about the Stanley Cup. I don't understand it. I mean, we have hockey every year, don't we, but an alien from outer space is something really unusual. Or am I crazy? It never happened before in history, did it, at least not that we know of. I suppose an alien could have landed in the mountains somewhere and no one noticed. We have no idea where he's from, but some are saying it could be a whole different galaxy. Galaxies are one hell of a ways farther away than solar systems. Ed was trying to explain it to me, it's astronomy. Not that I really know anything about it. It's true that there's been no news in the papers about the alien for more than a year now. Unless the scientists are holding something back, but I don't think so. They look so discouraged whenever they're on television. There's no communication yet, and the alien won't let them touch him too much, so they can't run a lot of tests like they do in the hospital. So maybe that's the reason: people are tired of not hearing any news. The way I think: America's the kind of country where everything has to be new. If it's not new, forget it.

Dave latches on to me again. "Dog Man," he says, "tell us about the alien." "I don't know anything you don't know, Dave," I say. "Aw, come on," says Dave. "You were talking to some scientist, weren't you? I heard you." "A guy came into the pet shop today," I say, wishing I could be somewhere else. "He was trying to find Oscar's German Deli." Dave breaks up at that, and I start boiling inside, I can't help it. I feel like punching him, but if I take a swing, he'll kill me. I understand that he wants me to take a swing, so he can kill me. People like that are always looking for an excuse to kill you. "Dog Man," Dave says, "you're so fuckin' funny, I swear you ought to be on the Leno show." "It's the truth," I say, feeling so stupid, I could sink into the ground. Dave makes you feel like

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an idiot no matter what you say. It's that look he has on his face. I say: "He really did want to find Oscar's German Deli." "Yeah," says Dave, "and he asked for a hot dog, didn't he?" A lot of hee-hawing at hot dog. "Wading River Dogs and More is running a hot-dog sale," says Dave. And then he says to me: "Do you charge extra for the bun? You put mustard on your dogs? Do you, Dog Man?"

Joe takes me by the arm and says, "Here, Marty, I wanted to show you something." He's saving my ass; that's what he's doing, because I'm so boiling now, I'm within an inch of hauling off and punching Dave no matter what. I don't like it when people make fun of the pet store. We do an okay business, and it's Susan's bread and butter. If she doesn't pay me much, it's because she can't afford to. Anyway, it's not like I'm that employable. "You just reminded me," Joe says, taking me away from Dave, so I won't be killed. I have trouble listening to him for a while, but then I realize he's talking about the alien. "Look at this," he says, taking out a piece of paper. It's a clipping. Joe is always carrying around clippings from papers and magazines and showing them to people. That's one of the things I like about him. "It's from *Scientific American*," he says. "What does it say?" I say, looking at the clipping, because there's no way I'm going to be able to read something from the *Scientific American*, you need a college degree for that. Joe has a college degree. He gets more and more interested as he talks. "They think the reason the alien picked Shoreham," he says, pointing at a photograph in the clipping, "is because of that huge heat cone overlooking the water. They think it might have reminded him of something from home. If you think about it, it's a very conspicuous feature from the sky, that structure, and being on the shore of the Sound like that too." The best look I ever got of the cone was when I was fishing once with the Andersons. Even before the alien, when it was going to be a nuclear power plant but didn't make it because LILCO couldn't put together an evacuation plan to get people off the Island in case of a meltdown, even then you couldn't really get much of a view of the cone from the land side. They always had all these high fences up while they were building it, because of the demonstrators. I look at the photograph and have to admit that it does seem a little alien. I never thought of it that way before. As Joe talks, I imagine a lot of green aliens all living inside a giant cone like bees. They're cozy and singing. Maybe our alien misses that. I guess I would too.

At the store the next day, Mr. Oliver comes in and tells us that Roger has worms again. Susan gives him the medicine he needs, tells him he really should keep Roger out of the neighbors' garbage, which she's told him before, and then they stand and talk for almost an hour about the vet in Sound Beach who's being investigated by the state. My opinion is that people like that ought to be put in jail with the key thrown away, after the things that vet did to the dogs, operating on them when he didn't

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have to, just for the money so he could have a new driveway put in, but I don't say anything, I'm still huffed over last evening and Dave. It takes me a while to get over things. I'm too sensitive for my own good, I know that. It's a big problem and getting worse as I get older, and I should probably go see a psychologist about it. They say there are ways a person can desensitize himself.

Who should come in then but the scientist from yesterday, the squinty one who was looking for Oscar's German Deli. My first thought is that he decided to buy Daisy after all even though she'll drive him up the wall. People are drawn to parrots, I've seen that many times. But no, the scientist comes up to me instead and introduces himself. "I'm Bill Pfeiffer," he says and holds out his hand. We shake hands. "I'm Martin Bogaty," I say, as if, no problem, scientists introduce themselves to me every other day. I'm glad I didn't let my mouth fall open. "Well, it's probably a silly idea, but all the sensible ideas haven't worked," says Bill Pfeiffer. He explains: "I was talking to some of my colleagues about this pet store and how you went on, Martin, about what animals are saying, and they suggested, seriously, that we give you a shot at the alien. And why not?" I nod, as if I understand what he's talking about. Susan comes over, and the scientist turns and introduces himself to her. He gives her his card too. She's suspicious at first, ready to be tough and angry, because this is a little strange and going on in her shop, but after a while she starts smiling. Mr. Oliver has come over, behind her, and is listening carefully. Before I know it, they're all three of them smiling and talking. "I think it's a great idea, Professor Pfeiffer," Mr. Oliver says. "Marty will be thrilled," Susan says, as if I'm not standing right there but somewhere else. "It's an opportunity for him, too," she says. Finally it begins to dawn on me: I'm going to get to see the alien, actually see him with my own two eyes. And not only that, but they're going to let me talk to him. "Holy," I say. I've never been so astounded in my life. Joe will have to sit down when he hears this one. Unless they make the whole thing classified and I'm not allowed to tell him. "What do I wear?" I say to Professor Bill Pfeiffer. "Just wear what you're wearing," he says, clapping me on the shoulder almost the way Joe does.

I have some trouble sleeping that night. They're going to pick me up in the morning, at the house, in a special government car. I lie on my back and listen to the wind blowing, and in addition to the wind noise, Mrs. Piscopo has her television on downstairs. You can hear the television laughter. It's not like those people are having a good time or that they even think some joke is funny, it's just television laughter, that's all it is, cold and mechanical. I'm thinking how lonely it is for an old woman to sit by herself in a living room with the television on and that cold laughter going in and going out like seawater at the beach. It's probably the Leno show she has on. I never watch it. I watched it once, and that was it. I

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don't like the way they make fun of people. From thinking of the Leno show and about how lonely it is to be an old woman, I start thinking about myself. It must be after midnight, and I'm still not at all sleepy. Meeting this alien will be the most important thing that ever happened to me. It's a more important thing even than going to the White House to meet the President and the First Lady. I mean, we have a lot of presidents, we get a new one every four years unless he's reelected, but tell me this, how many aliens do we have? Only one in the whole history of the world. You see my point. So I'm worried, afraid I'll say something I shouldn't, because sometimes I can be awfully dense, it's in my nature. I remember the time I was in school, in the tenth grade, and the whole class was laughing at me, just roaring with laughter, because I said something I shouldn't have to the teacher, and to this day I swear I don't know what it was. Mrs. Black made me go to the principal's office, but he didn't explain to me what I said. He just sighed and said, "Marty again." That's when I decided to stop going. I didn't see any percentage in being laughed at like that day after day. It didn't matter if I didn't graduate, I wasn't going to be getting a good job anyway. I'm not stupid, I know what the score is. Even when I was in the tenth grade, I knew what the score was.

I must have fallen asleep, because the next thing I know, it's morning and I'm sitting up in bed because someone's knocking at the door. It's Mrs. Piscopo. I can tell her knock, I've heard it so often. She says, "Marty. there's a car here for you." "Thank you, Mrs. Piscopo," I say. "Don't keep them waiting, Marty," she says, impatient, breathing on the other side of the door. "I won't," I say back, "but I got to go to the bathroom." The fact is, I also have to wait a few minutes for my hard-on to go down before I can get into my pants. One of the good things about being over the hill physically is that you have less problems of that kind with your dick. When I was in the eighth or ninth grade, Jesus, I had hard-ons all the time and practically everywhere. It got so embarrassing that I wanted to stay home. Except that it wasn't a real home I had, the kind with parents and your own room and a door you could close, so I couldn't. One time, I'll never forget it, I was called to the blackboard and wasn't able to go, even though the teacher repeated my name twice. I guess she thought I was day-dreaming or something. I don't have much of a problem anymore with my dick, particularly since I've learned to stay away from X-rated stuff and keep my eyes off women's bodies, even when it's summer and they aren't wearing a whole lot. When you're a person like me, you have to learn to be realistic, otherwise, Jack, you're in major trouble. Just like I know that I'm not going to ever have a really good job or be a professional football player or walk on the moon, I also know that I'm not going to ever have a woman of my own. And that's all right. I mean, it's important to know your limitations and who you are. It saves a person a lot of grief.

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There's not much to see on the way to the Shoreham power plant, which Professor Pfeiffer told me has been turned into a laboratory to study the alien. It's early and misty, and the men in the car don't say much. They're not rude, they're just quiet. I wish Professor Pfeiffer was with us, but he's not. "There's not a lot of traffic here now," I say. We're on Wading River Road. One of the men grunts, so I talk about the traffic problem because of the alien. "Those people must be really pissed off," I say, "to come here in a tour bus and not get to see the alien. All they get to see, from what I hear, is a five-minute videotape at Brookhaven, and the color's no good." "Yeah," says the man who grunted. He has a nice voice. The other man is just driving. I figure they must be military or in the secret service, to be so quiet, even when someone's talking, and to have such broad shoulders. I wonder if they're carrying guns too. They probably are. "Do you think I'll have to take an oath of secrecy?" I say. The men don't say anything, and I guess that means I will have to take an oath. I don't mind. Loose lips sink ships. We come to the gate, and the guard at the gate lets us pass. He looks bored. As for me, I'm getting so excited, I feel like I'm going to jump out of my skin. We pass some gray buildings, make a turn, and then I see the Sound and the huge cone. The car stops in front of a building, and we get out. This is so dramatic, it seems to me that I'm in a movie. Bruce Willis could be playing me. I love Bruce Willis. The first movie I saw him in was *Die Hard*. I saw it four times.

They take me down a hall to a room where a cheerful guy has me sign a paper and gives me a glossy orange badge to wear, then they take me farther down the hall to a big office where we sit and wait a while and then are allowed to go in. A man gets up from his desk. He's tired-looking, tired not only because it's early in the morning but because he has a lot of responsibility and all kinds of worries on his mind, like Susan. "I'm Robert," he says, but doesn't come over to shake my hand. "I'm Martin Bogaty," I say, but he says, "I know who you are." It's not rude, he doesn't mean it that way, but it's not friendly, either. Robert is Mr. Business. But hey, I can understand that. After all, what could be more important than the alien? For the first time the thought comes to me, and it's not a comfortable thought either, that maybe they're expecting me to do something with the alien that they can't do. And I'm thinking: Jesus, I hope they won't be too disappointed if it doesn't work out. I particularly hope Professor Pfeiffer won't be too disappointed, because it was his idea. I mean, I'm no good at all with your foreign languages. We had a couple weeks of French in the tenth grade, and I couldn't get any of it to stick in my head, not even Hello, how are you today. Professor Pfeiffer himself comes in, and I'm glad to see him. "Hi, Marty," he says and shakes my hand. "Hi, Professor Pfeiffer," I say. He says: "You can call me Bill." I nod, like it's no big deal, I have a lot of friends who are scientists and I call them by

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their first names. "Okay," he says, rubbing his hands, "let's take you to see the alien." "Now?" I say. "Sure," he says, "why not? And would you like a cup of coffee?" "Coffee, you mean when I see the alien?" "The alien doesn't mind coffee," says Professor Pfeiffer, "he drinks it himself sometimes." "In that case, all right," I say, "and I'd like a little milk in mine, if that's okay." Then suddenly it hits me: I just learned something new about the alien, something I've never heard before anywhere, not from the television or Joe or anyone else: the alien drinks coffee. Son of a gun. And I'm thinking: If he drinks coffee, how alien can he be?

Robert tells me that I have to report to him and that I'll be wearing a something-something monitor for the sessions. It's like James Bond getting his instructions at the beginning of the movie. Professor Pfeiffer, Bill, takes me down some stairs and down another hall, a smaller but wider one, and a girlish Oriental woman in a labcoat joins us and takes us to a room with a lot of bottles. She tells me to take my shirt off so she can put the monitor on me. She attaches a lot of different-colored wires to my head and chest, and they pinch but not too much, so I don't complain. I don't understand why they have to see what my heart and brain and liver are doing while I'm talking to the alien, because it's the alien that's important, not Martin Bogaty, but Professor Pfeiffer sees my question even though I don't say anything and he explains that all information is important, because in science you never know ahead of time what's important and what isn't. Or something like that. It sounds deep, and I'm impressed that he's taking the trouble to talk to me like this, because it's not necessary, I mean, I'll do whatever they tell me to do. So when I'm all hooked up, we go to the alien.

The alien's in a room you have to go through two special doors to get to. The doors make a swooshing noise and remind me of a bank vault. The place smells like old broccoli, and I see a guy sitting at a table. At first I think it's a guard killing time, but then I realize, from the color, that it's no guard, it's the alien himself. He's just sitting there, on a chair, like a regular person. The first thing I think is that they got the color all wrong: it's not peas or spinach, there's blue in it and a funny sheen, and not only that, the green isn't exactly the same green everywhere. I can't tell whether it's his clothes or his body. Maybe he's wearing a tight-fitting suit. "Pleased to meet you," I say, because it's the only thing to say that enters my head. The alien turns to look at me, and I think: gorilla, dog, tiger, but nobler than any of them. A big head. A row of eyes instead of two eyes. There's something very independent about him, you can feel that in his row of eyes. Independent but not proud, or at least not proud in a bad way. Proud in a good way. The scientists are keeping him here like an animal in a cage, but he doesn't think of himself at all like an animal. I bet he could leave anytime he liked. And it turns out later that I'm right. "I'm Martin Bogaty," I say, not sure whether or not I should put out

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my hand. They've told me the alien doesn't like to be touched too much. So I give a little wave instead and put my hand back. The alien opens his mouth, it's a really wide, deep mouth and doesn't seem to have any teeth in it, and he starts talking. The voice is coming from him but not the usual place a voice comes from. I can't decide whether it's higher up or lower down. It's like he's talking in stereo. The talking picks up speed a little, as he gets into the swing of it. He's actually saying a whole lot now, though of course I don't know a blessed word of his language. The reason I know it's a whole lot is that he's so earnest about what he's saying, I can tell from the one big eyebrow that goes across his forehead over all the eyes, it's bunched up earnestly. To be polite, I pull up a chair and listen. Behind me I hear Professor Pfeiffer start and gasp, like he's caught by surprise, and then he mutters something to another scientist. "First time, amazing," I think that's what he muttered. I'm not sure, but it makes me feel good. Maybe I'll be of use to these scientists after all. Wouldn't that be great. Then they might invite me back. I start talking too after a while, so that the alien doesn't have to keep up the conversation by himself, but they tap me on the shoulder and give me the sign to leave, so I get up and say to the alien, "Nice meeting you, it's been really interesting," and leave.

They take me to a special room with a lot of tiny lights and dials and start asking me questions. Robert is there and in charge. He has a fierce gleam in his eyes, as if he's a chief of police and I committed some terrible crime like murdering a child or robbing a bank. I have the odd thought that he doesn't have enough eyes to show me what he's feeling. His questions come out fast and hard and are filled with scientific words. He's angry with himself for using the scientific words with me, he knows he shouldn't, but he can't help using them because he's so impatient. I find out his last name, by the way, because it's on his badge as he faces me and I have time to put the letters together: Zinkhof. What a name, it's worse even than Bogaty. If I was named Zinkhof, I guess I'd do the same thing that he does, just tell people I was Robert and leave it at that.

Robert and another two scientists or government guys ask me what my impressions were and how I felt and what I noticed and what I thought strange and what I thought wasn't strange and if I was afraid and why not if I wasn't. I do my best to cooperate, I say everything in as much detail as I can, but I keep having the feeling that they're not satisfied with my answers. Maybe I should have been more observant. I do miss things, I don't deny it. Then Professor Pfeiffer pipes up, he says in a loud voice, not at all like his usual voice, "This is a breakthrough, Marty is communicating, damn it." "Yes, yes, but what is being communicated?" says Robert. "Let's just go with it, Bob," says Professor Pfeiffer. You can see he's angry with Mr. Business but has to keep it in, because Mr. Business is the boss here. Professor Pfeiffer says: "We'll find out. But let's go with

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it, it's working. When something's working, you have to go with it. You know that, Bob." I'm not sure what it is that's working or how I'm communicating, I mean, they didn't even give me a chance to talk that much, basically I just listened. They move off and talk among themselves, like football players after too many downs. Robert half-growls his words, and he's on the other side of the room, but I can hear "IQ" and I know he means me. One of the scientists shakes his head and says something about killing the goose that lays the golden eggs, and since I know about that story, I have the weird thought, like a picture, that what Robert really wants to do is open me up with a knife and look inside.

Things get less tense when Robert leaves. Professor Pfeiffer comes over and tells me that they want me to talk to the alien not only tomorrow and the day after tomorrow but regularly, and a lot. The scientists with him say the same thing and nod and smile at me, as if I'm their best friend. "He's paying attention to you, Marty," Professor Pfeiffer says. "He's never done that before. For a year he just kept looking around, no matter what we did, as if he was waiting for something. We don't know what this means, Marty, but we're very excited, I can tell you." "That's great, Professor Pfeiffer, I mean Bill," I say. "The only thing is, you know, I do have a job and Susan needs me at the store." "Don't worry about that," he says, his twitch twitching. "We have money. We'll work something out. Maybe you can work there half-time. I'll talk to Susan." I don't know what to think. My head's spinning from everything that's happened. I'm not used to so much stuff going on and so many people talking to me at once and things changing so quickly and dramatically. I mean, think about it, it's been only two days, and you could write a book about this already. The title of the book might be *Marty and the Alien: My Impressions.* My whole life seems to be going in a direction I never dreamed of, and fast, like there's no stopping it, a truck on a hill without a driver. That must be why I'm a little numb. There's one thing I want to know, it's on my mind. "Bill?" I say. "Yes, Marty?" "Why does the alien smell that way, like broccoli?" He looks at me, he doesn't understand. "You think he smells like broccoli?" "Old broccoli," I say. "When you get it in the refrigerator at the end of the summer, you have to use baking soda and a scrub brush." "I don't know," says Professor Pfeiffer, "but we'll make a note of it." And even as he says that, three scientists behind him are making a note of it, all of them, on their clipboards: broccoli.

So my new life begins, and I notice that I'm walking different, as if I'm rich or important, though I'm neither. I'm under an oath of secrecy, Robert insisted on that, so I can't tell Joe anything but I will someday, just him and me over some ice-cold Michelob, and once a week the Oriental lady does medical tests on me and writes down numbers, as if she's a doctor. Maybe she is a doctor, even though she seems so young. I think she's cute, but keep it to myself. That kind of oath of secrecy is second na-

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ture to me. Susan is very proud of me, as if I was her son. All kinds of people come to our store to see me, and while I'm working she talks about me to them, tells them that I'm part of the research team even though I never finished high school, stuff like that. We sold twelve puppies, ten kittens, four hamsters, two turtles, and a ferret in one day. I never saw Susan so happy, she's a different person, with this success. She put an ad in the local paper, which she never did before because it was so expensive, and clipped out the ad when it was printed. We have copies of it all over the store. It says, at the top, WADING RIVER DOGS AND MORE, and, in the lower right corner: "On our staff is Martin Bogaty, Alien Expert." I must read it fifty times a day before I go home. It's not true, of course, there's no staff, just me and Susan, and also I'm no expert, but the newspapers always dress up the truth a little, so why can't we, for the store? Mrs. Piscopo is scared of me, I think. She takes a step back and blinks every time she sees me. And not once, since the alien thing began, has she asked me to clip the hedge or clean the windows. I eat my supper in peace and quiet.

The alien chatters away when he sees me, and I forget about all the monitors and scientists and chatter back. I tell him about my day, about the animals, about Meatball. I tell him about what I read in the newspapers yesterday or saw on television. Sometimes I make notes, to remember to tell him. He doesn't have a television set or even a radio. I think that's wrong of the scientists but don't say anything. I mean, this is their show and I'm only a guest here. I tell the alien jokes but complicated things, too, for example, why I go fishing with people even though I don't like to go fishing. I tell him what I think about our world and where the human race is going if they don't watch out. Sometimes his row of eyes seem to get softer, like he wants to tell me something but doesn't know how. The problem is more than the difference between our two languages. I'm no good at languages, as I said, but I've learned to pick certain words out of his chatter, like *twee*. I don't know what *twee* means, but it seems to be a comment added on about something he just said. Like you might say, "I'm feeling lousy today," and then step back and say, "I complain a lot, don't I?" That's what *twee* does, it steps back and comments. When I tell Robert and the scientists things like this, my observations, they roll their eyes, and even though they're being polite, I know what they're thinking: His IQ. They're more interested in what the monitors say, in the numbers. I don't mind, I'm having the time of my life. Dave doesn't rile me anymore, and you'll never guess, but perhaps you will: Professor Pfeiffer, Bill, bought Daisy! "Is she driving you up the wall?" I ask. "She is, she is," he says. "I'll have to get ear plugs. That squawk goes right through you." But you can see he's crazy about her. They say that having a pet lowers your blood pressure and makes you live longer. It does that and more. I know from first-hand experience, I've

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seen lots of cases from working at the store. I had a dog myself once, but she got distemper after only two years and had to be put down. I still get choked up when I think about it. I realized then that I was too sensitive to have a dog. Meatball is my dog, when I'm at work. He doesn't lift his head in the morning when he sees me, and his face looks sad, but his tail thumps.

Susan takes me aside one day and says, "Marty, you're making quite a bit of money now from the government." "Well, I don't know how much," I say. "I'm not doing it for the money anyway." "I bet you're not even cashing those checks," she says. She's right, they're sitting on my dresser at home, in a row. I have seven checks. It's amazing how you can't hide anything from Susan. I think it's because she's a mother. I guess if mothers can't figure things out, they're lost, because kids won't tell you anything, particularly when they're Barry's age. "We're going to open an account for you at the bank," she says. I make a face. "Don't make a face," she says. "And not only that, we're going to buy a CD for you." "I don't need a CD," I say, "I don't have any of that equipment at home anyway." I don't partly because I can't read the instructions, the print's so small and the words are too technical. "Not that kind of CD, Marty," she says, smiling. The smile would insult me if it wasn't Susan. "I'm talking about a certificate of deposit. If your money just sits in the bank, it doesn't do anything." "I'd rather not, Susan," I say. I can't think of anything more boring than going into a bank. And people look at you like you're a piece of garbage or a freak. Thank you but no thanks. "You have to do it, Marty," Susan says. "You have to think about your old age. What are you going to do when you get old and can't work anymore?" "I'll go to a home," I say, thinking of Larry all shriveled up in his bed at the end of the hall but still cracking jokes and cackling though he has tubes in his throat and nose. "And who's going to pay for the home?" says Susan, holding me with her stern eyes. "I don't know," I say, squirming. Susan's right, I suppose. I don't understand these things, but from the steadiness of her voice you can tell it makes sense, what she's saying. I guess if you don't have the money when you get old, they throw you in the trash like a homeless person. "What do I have to wear, for the bank?" I say. "Just wear something clean, you'll be all right," she says, and gives my hand a squeeze. I'm touched because of this, very touched, in fact I'm so touched that I don't say much for the rest of the day and not much for the day after that. What Susan has said to me, you understand, with this bank and CD conversation, is that I'm part of her family now and she's part of mine. We're no longer just employer and employee. I can't believe that my life is turning out so good, at this late stage. I guess I owe it to Professor Pfeiffer and the alien. We go to the bank the next Friday and sign all the papers they give us. The manager shakes my hand at the end. "I read about you in the papers, Mr. Bogaty," he says, pronouncing my name almost right. I

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notice how respectful he is. "Thank you," I say, feeling numb. I don't think I'll ever get used to being a celebrity. The people at the bank let me keep the pen.

All good things come to an end, and this is no exception. It happened because I put my hand on the alien's knee. Or at least that triggered it. This is how it happened. I'm talking to the alien one day, and he's talking in that hiccuping rhythm he gets, only it's much worse than usual. I'm not sure of the reason for the hiccuping, but I think it's because something's bothering him and he's afraid that if he talks about it, actually puts it in his alien words, it might get worse or it might hear and come after him, that kind of thing, the way we do with our superstitions, you know, spitting or crossing ourselves when we say certain things. But at the same time he's being brave and not letting his fear get the better of him. So he puts it in words anyway, but the part of him that's afraid is causing the hiccuping. "Take it easy," I say, and put my hand on his knee, because we've spent quite a bit of time together and are not like strangers. He stops and looks at me with surprise, the way Meatball does sometimes, and all his eyes blink together. Then two extremely weird things happen, one right after the other. First, he says his first human word ever, "Easy," and it comes out perfectly clear, even clearer than a parrot talking though still in stereo. And then, before the scientists can do anything, the alien changes color, he turns blue. It takes about a second. From a bluish green he goes to a greenish blue and then to a deep blue-blue that maybe has a little purple or brown in it. I also notice that the broccoli smell is replaced by a different smell, something herbal and lemony. The alien reaches out and touches my head, and the next thing I know, he pulls on my head a little and then we have our two heads together, skull to skull. I'm touched, I think that this is his way of saying that we're friends. You see it in old movies sometimes, when the Indian and the cowboy make a deal after they've been enemies. You know, blood brothers. Maybe the alien appreciates that I understand about his fear although it's only a guess on my part. Robert runs in, yelling, and all the scientists are yelling, I'm not sure why, but I realize that the alien is leaving us now. That's why they're upset, because so much government money has gone into this and he's leaving. He floats up to the ceiling, goes through the ceiling, and disappears, does it as if it's the most natural thing in the world, and maybe it is to him.

Robert says something like "Interatomic!" in a shout. I say, "Holy." Maybe I say it more than once. Professor Pfeiffer says, "Did you see that? Did you see that?" as if we're at a baseball game and someone just hit it out of the park with a big crack. Sometimes you can tell the ball is going out of the park just from the sound of that crack. Robert runs up to me and hoists me into the air by my shirt, tearing it a little. "What did you do?" he says, foam at the corners of his mouth. Now I remember that I

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wasn't supposed to touch the alien. I start to apologize. We're all excited and say stupid things, I guess. There's a lot of running around. They run upstairs to see if the alien's there. But the alien isn't anyplace in the building. You don't have to be a genius to figure that one out. The alien's gone home, like E.T.

That's when the questions begin, and they're still going on, although it's been a year now since the alien went through the ceiling. I'm asked the questions over and over, and I try my best to answer, but no one likes my answers. At one point it was practically around the clock, then ten hours a day. Finally I put my foot down, and it's four hours now. It's stressful. "What did the alien say to you?" That's one question. He didn't say anything, really, not in so many words. "What did they come to tell us? What do they want of us?" That's another question. Even the President of the United States himself came and helped out with the questioning. I guess they thought that if I was holding something back, I wouldn't when I saw the President himself. I was so impressed, it was hard for me to open my mouth to talk. To see someone you've seen only on television or on the cover of *Newsweek*, it's weird. The President is a regular person. I even smelled his cologne. He looks shorter in real life, and older and more tired, but he's so dynamic and handsome up close that if he told you to jump into a burning building for the good of the country, you'd do it right away without asking one question. "What do they want from us, Marty?" he asked, putting his hand on my knee the way I did to the alien. This is what I said, and what they don't like: "It's not like that, sir." I said "sir" because I didn't know how to address him. Someone later told me I should have said, "Mr. President," everyone knows that. Well, everyone may know that, but when the President of the United States walks into the room, pulls up a chair next to you, and puts his hand on your knee, you might not be thinking so straight, IQ or no IQ. "It's not like that, sir," I said. "The alien wasn't part of any them, he was here just for himself, and he didn't want to say anything to us, he just wanted to say something to someone and I guess he picked me."

They can't accept that because, they say, why would an intelligent being travel all those light-years from another galaxy just to talk to one person? Contact, they say, and I hear the word "contact" all the time now, isn't between two people, it's between two civilizations. Well, they're smarter than I am, that goes without saying, and what they say sounds sensible and right. Except in the case of our green alien who turned blue and left, excuse me, it's wrong. I'm as sure of that as I'm sitting here. They laugh at me, and it's not a friendly laugh. "Why you?" they ask. "Why did the alien cross all those light-years to talk to you, just you? Are you an expert in anything? Do you hold any key to the secret of life or the human race? Are you wise, virtuous, the bearer of any special insight? You're just a

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et store. You clean cages, you give the dogs baths for fleas, you mop the floor."

I have two answers to this, one I tell them and one I keep to myself and will forever, because it's not the kind of thing that can be said in public, it's too embarrassing. The answer I give them goes like this. Sometimes a family comes into the store because their dog is old and sick, and maybe the vet has told them that it doesn't have much longer. Dogs get blind and full of tumors and they start making messes again, when they're ten or fifteen years old. So the family comes to our store to buy a puppy that will replace the old dog, when it dies, maybe the same breed, so their kid will still have a pet. As if the death doesn't take place, you see. Like getting a new washing machine. And I've seen it more than once that the kid—I remember a little blonde girl in particular, with pigtails—makes a sour face and says something like "I don't want *a* dog, I want *our* dog!" And the parents say something like "But Biff will leave us soon." You get the idea, anyway. I don't know why the alien came here and why he left, but it seems possible to me that he came to talk to one person and not to a whole civilization. It isn't that way in the movies, I know, but it's still possible. Real life isn't always like the movies.

When they ask me, "But why you? Why Martin Bogaty?" I shrug, keeping the second answer to myself. But here's the second answer. It goes like this. Early on, I saw that the alien wasn't a he or a she. I'm not talking about whether it had a dick or not. I mean, no one knew that anyway, because the alien's anatomy was all different and they could only check him from a distance. I'm saying "he" and "him," but I knew that the alien wasn't a male alien. How did I know this? It's hard to explain. Let me say first that saying it wasn't a male or female doesn't mean it was neuter either, like a dog you neuter. It's not a matter, really, of what sex the alien was. This is about something else. What I'm getting at is that the reason I knew that the alien wasn't a he or she is because I saw that the alien was a lot like me. Dave was right when he made that joke about the alien and me having a lot in common. We had more in common than anybody guessed, and I think that was the reason the alien liked me and finally turned color and left, because he had made contact with someone like himself, and that was the reason he came in the first place.

I think I was thirteen or fourteen when I figured it out, about myself, that I wasn't going to be a man who went on dates, got married, and had children. It might have been earlier. There was a party, and a girl at the party was talking to me, and at one point she said something like "But *you* won't have that problem, Marty." The subject had to do with the troubles men and women had with each other. The girl's parents were getting a divorce, I think. They hated each other like poison. The girl was very sophisticated about it. I don't know where she is now, or even if she remembers my name and saw me in the papers. Anyway, I understood

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what she meant by my not having that problem. She wasn't talking about being a fag or anything like that, or about being put in an institution, she meant that people who are like me simply aren't going to be part of that part of life. In the circus, for example, some of the circus people aren't in any of the rings, they're on the sides where there are no lights, or they're in the back. The guy who sweeps up after the elephant with a big broom, for example. Some people may laugh when they see that, but they don't care who the guy is. They don't talk about him. What is there to talk about? I'm not part of the main action. I'm sort of a bystander or watcher. And that's what the alien was, or is, wherever he is now. Maybe, at his home, when all the aliens nest together in their huge heat cones and hum together warm and comfortably like bees, maybe he has to stand outside and watch. It's not really a sad thing, though. It's an interesting thing, in a way, not to belong. When you're outside looking in, you see a different world than they see. Look how I used to play with Barry before he got zits. I wasn't his father or uncle, but I wasn't another kid either. That's why I could see things about him that no one else could see, and he knew it. So my theory is, the alien wanted to communicate with someone like himself, that was the kind of "contact" he was looking for, and I guess it was important enough for him to cross all those light-years to find it, though if you can float through ceilings, maybe crossing light-years is not such a problem.

Professor Pfeiffer comes into the store. He says, "Marty, Susan." Right away, we know something's wrong. He holds up a hand and smiles a sad smile. "I'm leaving," he says. "It's been nice knowing you." "Where are you going, Bill?" Susan asks. I keep on cleaning the gerbil tunnel that goes in the front window, but I'm listening while I'm cleaning. "Back to Washington," he says. "They're closing down the lab at Shoreham." "Too bad," says Susan. "We'll miss you." "Me too," says Professor Pfeiffer, squinting. "But I have a good souvenir. Daisy." "How's she doing?" asks Susan. "She was cranky for a while, I don't know why, but I think she's settling down. I got a new cage for her, and a new cover. And, Marty, you'll like to hear this. I bought an old-fashioned mop and bucket for her. When Daisy behaves, I take it out and mop the floor and wring the mop out. She loves that." "Marty's been under a cloud," says Susan, as if I'm not there. "I think it's because of all the questioning. He says they ask the same things over and over and yell at him." "That'll stop too," says Professor Pfeiffer. "The whole thing is closing down, and about time." "It was such a disappointment," says Susan. "We never even learned where the alien came from." The scientist nods, as if to say: No use crying over spilt milk. He comes over to me. "So," he says, "aren't you going to say goodbye to me, Marty?" "I hope you're not angry," I say. "Why should I be angry?" he says, eyebrows raised in surprise. "Didn't I cost you your job?" I say. "Heavens no," he says. "What gave you that idea? I still have a job. You

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mean, the Shoreham Project? I'll tell you the truth, Marty, I never did like the way it was run." He means Robert. "They didn't even let the alien watch television," I say. "There you are," he says, making a joke out of it. "I would have left too." He holds out his hand, and I get up and shake it. I can tell, from his eyes, though he only has two to express things, and two isn't very much, that he's not laughing at me anymore, not even a little, inside. I notice, too, how pale his skin is. I guess I miss that other skin that wasn't peas or spinach. "Goodbye, Bill," I say, and the way we hold hands, so friendly and equal, it reminds me a little of the strangest moment of all in the whole story, but also the most natural, if that makes any sense, the skulls touching, mine and the alien's, which now seems like an incredible dream.●

NEXT ISSUE

JUNE COVER STORY

Our next issue, the June issue, is the first in our new, larger-size format (see the announcement on page 7 for details), and we've done everything we can to insure that it's a very special issue indeed, including jamming it full-to-bursting with even more top-quality material than usual!

Pyrotechnic British writer **Ian McDonald**, author of the acclaimed novel *Evolution's Shore*, sweeps us along on an epic journey of almost unimaginable scope and grandeur in our June cover story, a huge, fast-paced, and wildly imaginative novella called "The Days of Solomon Gursky" that traces one man's journey through life and into death and then out the other side . . . that takes us from a troubled near-future to the distant stars and on to the very end of the universe and the end of time itself—and beyond . . . that takes us from the embattled human to transhuman and on to a triumphant apotheosis very near to godhood—and then moves beyond that as well . . . Gorgeously colored, richly detailed, lushly imaginative, this is modern Space Opera at its very best, and we can assure you that Widescreen Science Fiction doesn't get any more widescreen than this. Don't miss it! The evocative cover painting is by Hugo-winning artist **Jim Burns.**

TOP-FLIGHT WRITERS

Recent Hugo-winner **James Patrick Kelly**, one of our most popular authors, returns to take us to a strange alien planet for a tale of Biological Mystery and Wild Romance, and of the dangers and unexpected consequences of not doing things The Way They've Always Been Done, as he tells an exotic "Lovestory"; British writer **Paul J. McAuley**, another modern master of

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updated wide-screen Space Opera, the kind of stuff sometimes called "radical hard science fiction," gives us an unsettling look at a bizarre posthuman future on a distant alien world, where a young girl has to be willing to take just about any chance to get ahead, no matter how terrifying and hideously dangerous that chance might turn out to be, in the suspenseful "17"; new writer **Sarah Clemens** makes her *Asimov's* debut with a moving study of a child in the 1950s South who stumbles across a Family Secret of a most unusual kind, and discovers that there's much more to the world than there seems to be, in the bittersweet "Red"; Australian writer **Stephen Dedman** takes us back to the days of the dinosaurs, and along on an expedition that doesn't turn out quite the way it was expected to, as he details the ingenious search for a "Target of Opportunity"; and **M. Shayne Bell**, who was a Hugo finalist a couple of years ago with his popular story "Mrs. Lincoln's China," takes us back to Nineteenth Century Africa, to a time when, to Europeans, Africa was the largely unexplored Dark Continent, to try to unravel the intriguing and perhaps vitally important mystery of "The Moon Girl."

EXCITING FEATURES

Next issue, in honor of our upcoming launch of an *Asimov's* Internet website (see the June issue for details), we will feature the debut of a new column, one that will be appearing here from time to time on an irregular basis, as the intrepid James Patrick Kelly sets out with gun and camera—or with mouse and modem, anyway—to explore the vast jungles and impenetrable thickets of the Internet in search of websites of interest to SF readers, and in general to keep an eye out for Cool Things that you can do while you're online. Kelly's column is called "You Can Get Everywhere From Here," and we think you may find it useful—and, more importantly, enjoy it! Jim's column can also be found on our brand-new website **www.asimovs.com**. We'll have more on this new development next issue as well. Also in June, **Robert Silverberg's** "Reflections" column returns to examine the consequences of "The Science Fictionalization of Everything"; and **Norman Spinrad's** "On Books" column explores "The Edge of the Envelope"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, letters, and other features.

Look for our groundbreaking June issue on sale on your newsstand on May 5, 1998, or subscribe today and be sure to miss none of the great stuff we have coming up for you this year!

Coming soon: exciting new stories by **Robert Silverberg, R. Garcia y Robertson, Greg Egan, Kristine Kathryn Rusch, William Barton, Stephen Baxter, Esther M. Friesner, Rick Shelley, Ian R MacLeod, Michael Swanwick, Avram Davidson, Kage Baker, Alexander Jablokov, Robert Reed, Leslie What,** and many others.

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Terry Bisson

GET ME TO THE CHURCH ON TIME

The amazing exploits of Wilson Wu and his pal Irving, who we first met in "The Hole in the Hole" (February 1994), and Irv's curvaceous fiancée, Candy, who we came to know in "The Edge of the Universe" (August 1996), are amusingly recounted in Terry Bisson's hilarious new tale.

Illustration by Mark Evans

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1.

The best way to approach Brooklyn is from the air. The Brooklyn Bridge is nice, but let's admit it, to drive (or bicycle, or worse, walk) into homely old Brooklyn directly from the shining towers of downtown Manhattan is to court deflation, dejection, even depression. The subway is no better. You ride from one hole to another: there's no in-between, no approach, no drama of arrival. The Kosciusko Bridge over Newtown Creek is okay, because even drab Williamsburg looks lively after the endless, orderly graveyards of Queens. But just as you are beginning to appreciate the tarpaper tenement rooftops of Brooklyn, there it is again, off to the right: the skyline of Manhattan, breaking into the conversation like a tall girl with great hair in a low-cut dress who doesn't have to say a word. It shouldn't be that way, it's not fair, but that's the way it is. No, the great thing about a plane is that you can only see out of one side. I like to sit on the right. The flights from the south come in across the dark wastes of the Pine Barrens, across the shabby, sad little burgs of the Jersey shore, across the mournful, mysterious bay, until the lights of Coney Island loom up out of the night, streaked with empty boulevards. Manhattan is invisible, unseen off to the left, like a chapter in another book or a girl at another party. The turbines throttle back and soon you are angling down across the streetlight-spangled stoops and backyards of my legend-heavy hometown. Brooklyn!

"There it is," I said to Candy.

"Whatever." Candy hates to fly, and she hadn't enjoyed any of the sights, all the way from Huntsville. I tried looking over her. I could see the soggy fens of Jamaica Bay, then colorful, quarrelsome Canarsie, then Prospect Park and Grand Army Plaza; and there was the Williamsburg Tower with its always-accurate clock. Amazingly, we were right on time.

I wished now I hadn't given Candy the window seat, but it was our Honeymoon, after all. I figured she would learn to love to fly. "It's beautiful!" I said.

"I'm sure," she muttered.

I was anticipating the usual long holding pattern, which takes you out over Long Island Sound, but before I knew it, we were making one of those heart-stopping wing-dipping jet-plane U-turns over the Bronx, then dropping down over Rikers Island, servos whining and hydraulics groaning as the battered flaps and beat-up landing gear *clunked* into place for the ten thousandth (at least) time. These PreOwned Air 707s were seasoned travelers, to say the least. The seat belts said Eastern, the pillows said Pan Am, the barf bags said Braniff, and the peanuts said People Express. It all inspired a sort of confidence. I figured if they were going to get unlucky and go down, they would have done so already.

Through the window, the dirty water gave way to dirty concrete, then

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the wheels hit the runway with that happy *yelp* so familiar to anyone who has ever watched a movie, even though it's a sound you never actually hear in real life.

And this was real life. New York!

"You can open your eyes," I said, and Candy did, for the first time since the pilot had pushed the throttles forward in Huntsville. I'd even had to feed her over the Appalachians, since she was afraid that if she opened her eyes to see what was on her tray, she might accidentally look out the window. Luckily, dinner was just peanuts and pretzels (a two-course meal).

We were cruising into the terminal like a big, fat bus with wings, when Candy finally looked out the window. She even ventured a smile. The plane was limping a little (flat tire?) but this final part of the flight she actually seemed to enjoy. "At least you didn't hold your breath," I said.

"What?"

"Never mind."

Ding! We were already at the gate, and right on time. I started to grope under the seat in front of me for my shoes. Usually there's plenty of time before everyone starts filing out of the plane, but to my surprise it was already our turn; Candy was pulling at my arm and impatient-looking passengers, jammed in the aisle behind, were frowning at me.

I carried my shoes out and put them on in the terminal. They're loafers. I'm still a lawyer, even though I don't exactly practice.

"New York, New York," I crooned to Candy as we traversed the tunnel to the baggage pickup. It was her first trip to my home town; our first trip together anywhere. She had insisted on wearing her Huntsville Parks Department uniform, so that if there was a crash they wouldn't have any trouble IDing her body (whoever "they" were), but she would have stood out in the crowd anyway, with her trim good looks.

Not that New Yorkers aren't trim. Or good looking. The black clad, serious-looking people racing by on both sides were a pleasant relief after the K-mart pastels and unremitting sunny smiles of the South. I was glad to be home, even if only for a visit. New Yorkers, so alien and menacing to many, looked welcoming and familiar to me.

In fact, one of them looked *very* familiar. . . .

"Studs!"

It was Arthur "Studs" Blitz from the old neighborhood. Studs and I had been best friends until high school, when we had gone our separate ways. I had gone to Lincoln High in Coney Island, and he had gone to Carousel, the trade school for airline baggage handlers. It looked like he had done well. His green and black baggage handler's uniform was festooned with medals that clinked and clanked as he bent over an access panel under the baggage carousel, changing a battery in a cellular phone. It seemed a funny place for a phone.

"Studs, it's me, Irving. Irv!"

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"Irv the Perv!" Studs straightened up, dropping the new battery, which rolled away. I stopped it with my foot while we shook hands, rather awkwardly.

"From the old neighborhood," I explained to Candy as I bent down for the battery and handed it to Studs. It was a 5.211 volt AXR. It seemed a funny battery for a phone. "Studs is one of the original Ditmas Playboys."

"Playboys?" Candy was, still is, easily shocked. "Perv?"

"There were only two of us," I explained. "We built a treehouse."

"A treehouse in Brooklyn? But I thought . . ."

"Everybody thinks that!" I said. "Because of that book."

"What book?"

"Movie, then. But in fact, *lots* of trees grow in Brooklyn. They grow behind the apartments and houses, where people don't see them from the street. Right, Studs?"

Studs nodded, snapping the battery into the phone. "Irv the Perv," he said again.

"Candy is my fiancée. We just flew in from Alabama," I said. "We're on our Honeymoon."

"Fiancée? Honeymoon? Alabama?"

Studs seemed distracted. While he got a dial tone and punched in a number, I told him how Candy and I had met (leaving out my trip to the Moon, as told in "The Hole in the Hole"). While he put the phone under the carousel and replaced the access panel, I told him how I had moved to Alabama (leaving out the red-shift and the nursing home, as told in "The Edge of the Universe"). I was just about to explain why we were having the Honeymoon before the wedding, when the baggage carousel started up.

"Gotta go," said Studs. He gave me the secret Ditmas Playboy wave and disappeared through an AUTHORIZED ONLY door.

"Nice uniform," said Candy, straightening her own. "And did you see that big gold medallion around his neck? Wasn't that a Nobel Prize?"

"A Nobel Prize for baggage? Not very likely."

Our bags were already coming around the first turn. That seemed like a good sign. "How come there's a cell phone hidden underneath the carousel?" Candy asked, as we picked them up and headed for the door.

"Some special baggage handlers' trick, I guess," I said.

How little, then, I knew!

2.

Flying into New York is like dropping from the twentieth century back into the nineteenth. Everything is crowded, colorful, old—and slow. For example, it usually takes longer to get from La Guardia to Brooklyn than from Huntsville to La Guardia.

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Usually! On this, our Honeymoon trip, however, Candy and I made it in record time, getting to curbside for the #38 bus just as it was pulling in, and then catching the F train at Roosevelt Avenue just as the doors were closing. No waiting on the curb or the platform; it was hardly like being home! Of course, I wasn't complaining.

After a short walk from the subway, we found Aunt Minnie sitting on the steps of the little Ditmas Avenue row house she and Uncle Mort had bought for seventy-five hundred dollars fifty years ago, right after World War II, smoking a cigarette. She's the only person I know who still smokes Kents.

"You still go outside to smoke?" I asked.

"You know your Uncle Mort," she said. When I was growing up, Aunt Minnie and Uncle Mort had been like second parents, living only a block and a half away. Since my parents had died, they had been my closest relatives. "Plus it's written into the reverse mortgage—NO SMOKING! They have such rules!"

Born in the Old Country, unlike her little sister, my mother, Aunt Minnie still had the Lifthatvanian way of ending a statement with a sort of verbal shrug. She gave me one of her smoky kisses, then asked, "So, what brings you back to New York?"

I was shocked. "You didn't get my letters? We're getting married."

Aunt Minnie looked at Candy with new interest. "To an airline pilot?"

"This is Candy!" I said. "She's with the Huntsville Parks Department. You didn't get my messages?"

I helped Candy drag the suitcases inside, and while we had crackers and pickled *lifthat* at the oak table Uncle Mort had built years ago, in his basement workshop, I explained the past six months as best I could. "So you see, we're here on our Honeymoon, Aunt Minnie," I said, and Candy blushed.

"First the Honeymoon and then the marriage!?" Aunt Minnie rolled her eyes toward the mantel over the gas fireplace, where Uncle Mort's ashes were kept. He, at least, seemed unsurprised. The ornate decorative eye on the urn all but winked.

"It's the only way we could manage it," I said. "The caterer couldn't promise the ice sculpture until Thursday, but Candy had to take her days earlier or lose them. Plus my best man is in South America, or Central America, I forget which, and won't get back until Wednesday."

"Imagine that, Mort," Aunt Minnie said, looking toward the mantel again. "Little Irving is getting married. And he didn't even invite us!"

"Aunt Minnie! You're coming to the wedding. Here's your airline ticket." I slid it across the table toward her and she looked at it with alarm.

"That's a pretty cheap fare."

"PreOwned Air," I said. She looked blank, so I sang the jingle, "*Our planes are old, but you pocket the gold.*"

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"You've seen the ads," Candy offered.

"We never watch TV, honey," Aunt Minnie said, patting her hand. "You want us to go to Mississippi? Tonight?"

"Alabama," I said. "And it's not until Wednesday. We have to stay over a Tuesday night to get the midweek nonstop supersaver round-trip price-buster Honeymoon plus-one fare. The wedding is on Thursday, at noon. That gives us tomorrow to see the sights in New York, which means we should get to bed. Aunt Minnie, didn't you read my letters?"

She pointed toward a stack of unopened mail on the mantel, next to the urn that held Uncle Mort's ashes. "Not really," she said. "Since your Uncle Mort passed on, I have sort of given it up. He made letter openers, you remember?"

Of course I remembered. At my Bar Mitzvah, Uncle Mort gave me a letter opener (which irritated my parents, since it was identical to the one they had gotten as a wedding present). He gave me another one for high school graduation. Ditto City College. Uncle Mort encouraged me to go to law school, and gave me a letter opener for graduation. I still have them all, good as new. In fact, they have never been used. It's not like you need a special tool to get an envelope open.

"Aunt Minnie," I said, "I wrote, and when you didn't write back, I called, several times. But you never picked up."

"I must have been out front smoking a cigarette," she said. "You know how your Uncle Mort is about second hand smoke."

"You could get an answering machine," Candy offered.

"I have one," Aunt Minnie said. "Mort bought it for me at 47th Street Photo, right before they went out of business." She pointed to the end table, and sure enough, there was a little black box next to the phone. The red light was blinking.

"You have messages," I said. "See the blinking red light? That's probably me."

"Messages?" she said. "Nobody told me anything about messages. It's an answering machine. I figure it answers the phone, so what's the point in me getting involved?"

"But what if somebody wants to talk to you?" I protested.

She spread her hands; she speaks English but gestures in Lifthatvanian. "Who'd want to talk to a lonely old woman?"

While Aunt Minnie took Candy upstairs and showed her our bedroom, I checked the machine. There were eleven messages, all from me, all telling Aunt Minnie we were coming to New York for our Honeymoon, and bringing her back to Alabama with us for the wedding, and asking her, please, to return my call.

I erased them.

Aunt Minnie's guest room was in the back of the house, and from the

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window I could see the narrow yards where I had played as a kid. It was like looking back on your life from middle age (almost, anyway), and seeing it literally. There were the fences I had climbed, the grapevines I had robbed, the corners I had hidden in. There, two doors down, was Studs's backyard, with the big maple tree. The treehouse we had built was still there. I could even see a weird blue light through the cracks. Was someone living in it?

After we unpacked, I took Candy for a walk and showed her the old neighborhood. It looked about the same, but the people were different. The Irish and Italian families had been replaced by Filipinos and Mexicans. Studs's parents' house, two doors down from Aunt Minnie's, was dark except for a light in the basement—and the blue light in the treehouse out back. My parents' house, a block and a half away on East Fourth, was now a rooming house for Bangladeshi cab drivers. The apartments on Ocean Parkway were filled with Russians.

When we got back to the house, Aunt Minnie was on the porch, smoking a Kent. "See how the old neighborhood has gone to pot?" she said. "All these foreigners!"

"Aunt Minnie!" I said, shocked. "You were a foreigner, too, remember? So was Uncle Mort."

"That's different."

"How?"

"Never you mind."

I decided to change the subject. "Guess who I saw at the airport today? Studs Blitz, from down the block, remember?"

"You mean young Arthur," said Aunt Minnie. "He still lives at home. His father died a couple of years ago. His mother, Mavis, takes in boarders. Foreigners. Thank God your Uncle Mort's benefits spared me that."

She patted the urn and the cat's eye glowed benevolently.

That night, Candy and I began our Honeymoon by holding hands across the gap between our separate beds. Candy wanted to wait until tomorrow night, after we had "done the tourist thing" to "go all the way." Plus she was still nervous from the flight.

I didn't mind. It was exciting and romantic. Sort of.

"Your Aunt Minnie is sweet," Candy said, right before we dropped off to sleep. "But can I ask one question?"

"Shoot."

"How can ashes object to smoke?"

3.

Our return tickets were for Wednesday. That meant we had one full Honeymoon day, Tuesday, to see the sights of New York, most of which

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(all of which, truth be told) are in Manhattan. Candy and I got up early and caught the F train at Ditmas. It came right away. We got off at the next-to-last stop in Manhattan, Fifth Avenue, and walked uptown past St. Patrick's and Tiffany's and Disney and the Trump Tower; all the way to Central Park and the Plaza, that magnet for Honeymooners. When we saw all the people on the front step, we thought there had been a fire. But they were just smoking; it was just like Brooklyn.

We strolled through the lobby, peering humbly into the Palm Court and the Oak Room, then started back downtown, still holding hands. Candy was the prettiest girl on Fifth Avenue (one of the few in uniform), and I loved watching her watch my big town rush by. New York! Next stop, Rockefeller Center. We joined the crowd overlooking the skaters, secretly waiting for someone to fall; it's like NASCAR without the noise. Candy was eyeing the line at Nelson's On the Rink, where waiters on rollerblades serve cappuccinos and lattes. It's strictly a tourist joint; New Yorkers don't go for standing in line and particularly not for coffee. But when I saw how fast the line was moving, I figured what the hell. We were seated right away and served right away, and the expense (we are talking four-dollar croissants here) was well worth it.

"What now?" asked Candy, her little rosebud smile deliciously flaked with pastry. I couldn't imagine anyone I would rather Honeymoon with.

"The Empire State Building, of course."

Candy grimaced. "I'm afraid of heights. Besides, don't they shoot people up there?"

"We're not going to the top, silly," I said. "That's a tourist thing." Taking her by the hand, I took her on my own personal Empire State Building Tour, which involves circling it and seeing it above and behind and through and between the other midtown buildings; catching it unawares, as it were. We started outside Lord & Taylor on Fifth, then cut west on 40th alongside Bryant Park for the sudden glimpse through the rear of a narrow parking lot next to American Standard; then started down Sixth, enjoying the angle from Herald Square (and detouring through Macy's to ride the wooden-treaded escalators). Then we worked back west through "little Korea," catching two dramatic views up open airshafts and one across a steep sequence of fire escapes. Standing alone, the Empire State Building looks stupid, like an oversized toy or a prop for a Superman action figure. But in its *milieu* it is majestic, like an Everest tantalizingly appearing and disappearing behind the ranges. We circled the great *massif* in a tightening spiral for almost an hour, winding up (so to speak) on Fifth Avenue again, under the big art deco façade. The curb was crowded with tourists standing in line to buy T-shirts and board buses. The T-shirt vendors were looking gloomy, since the buses were coming right away and there was no waiting.

I had saved the best view for last. It's from the middle of Fifth Avenue,

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looking straight up. You have to time it just right with the stoplights, of course. Candy and I were about to step off the curb, hand in hand, when a messenger in yellow and black tights (one of our city's colorful jesters) who was straddling his bike beside a rack of pay phones on the corner of 33rd hailed me.

"Yo!"

I stopped. That's how long I'd been in Alabama.

"Your name Irv?"

I nodded. That's how long I'd been in Alabama.

He handed me the phone with a sort of a wink and a sort of a shrug, and was off on his bike before I could hand it back (which was my first instinct).

I put the phone to my ear. Rather cautiously, as you might imagine. "Hello?"

"Irv? Finally!"

"Wu?!" Everybody should have a friend like Wilson Wu, my Best Man. Wu studied physics at Bronx Science, pastry in Paris, math at Princeton, Herbs in Taiwan, law at Harvard (or was it Yale?) and caravans at a Gobi caravansary. Did I mention he's Chinese-American, can tune a twelve string guitar in under a minute with a logarithmic calculator, and is over six feet tall? I met him when we worked at Legal Aid, drove Volvos, and went to the Moon; but that's another story. Then he went to Hawaii and found the edge of the universe, yet another story still. Now he was working as a meteorological entomologist, whatever that was, in the jungles of Quetzalcan.

Wherever that was.

"Who'd you expect?" Wu asked. "I'm glad you finally picked up. Your Aunt Minnie told me you and Candy were in midtown doing the tourist thing."

"We're on our Honeymoon."

"Oh no! Don't tell me I missed the wedding!"

"Of course not," I said. "We had to take the Honeymoon first so Candy could get the personal time. How'd you persuade Aunt Minnie to answer the phone? Or me, for that matter? Are you in Huntsville already?"

"That's the problem, Irv. I'm still in Quetzalcan. The rain forest, or to be more precise, the cloud forest; the canopy, in fact. Camp Canopy, we call it."

"But the wedding is Thursday! You're the Best Man, Wu! I've already rented your tux. It's waiting for you at Five Points Formal Wear."

"I know all that," said Wu. "But I'm having a problem getting away. That's why I called, to see if you can put the wedding off for a week."

"A week? Wu, that's impossible. Cindy has already commissioned the ice sculpture."

Wu's wife, Cindy, was catering the wedding.

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"The hurricane season is almost upon us," said Wu, "and my figures are coming out wrong. I need more time."

"You don't have a figure—you're a guy," I pointed out. "And what do figures have to do with meteors or bugs, anyway?"

"Irving—" Wu always called me by my full name when he was explaining something he felt he shouldn't have to explain. "Meteorology is weather, not meteors. And the bugs have to do with the Butterfly Effect. We've been over this before."

"Oh yes, of course, I remember," I said, and I did, sort of. But Wu went over it again anyway: how the flap of a butterfly's wing in the rain forest could cause a storm two thousand miles away. "It was only a matter of time," he said, "before someone located that patch of rain forest, which is where we are, and cloned the butterfly. It's a moth, actually. We have twenty-two of them, enough for the entire hurricane season. We can't stop the hurricanes, but we can delay, direct, and divert them a little, which is why ABC flew us down here."

"ABC?"

"They bought the television rights to the hurricane season, Irv. Don't you read the trades? CBS got the NBA and NBC got the Superbowl. ABC beat out Ted Turner, which is fine with me. Who needs a Hurricane Jane, even upgraded from a tropical storm? The network hired us to edge the 'canes toward the weekends as much as possible, when the news is slow. And State Farm is chipping in, since any damage we can moderate is money in their pocket. They are footing the bill for this little Hanging Hilton, in fact. 'Footing,' so to speak. My feet haven't touched the ground in three weeks."

"I built a treehouse once," I said. "Me and Studs Blitz, back in the old neighborhood."

"A treehouse in Brooklyn?" interjected a strangely accented voice.

"Who's that?" I asked.

"Dmitri, stay off the line!" barked Wu. "I'll explain later," he said to me. "But I'm losing my signal. Which way you two lovebirds heading?"

We were heading downtown. Our first stop was Sweet Nothings, the bridal boutique in New York's historic lingerie district. Candy made me wait outside while she shopped. Inspired, I bought a Honeymoon Bungee at the Oriental Novelty Arcade on Broadway. ("What's it for?" Candy asked apprehensively. I promised to show her later.) Feeling romantic, I took her little hand in mine and led her back over to Sixth and presented her with the world's largest interactive bouquet—a three block stroll through the flower market. We were just emerging from a tunnel of flowering ferns at 26th, when the pay phone on the corner rang. On a hunch, I picked it up.

When you get hunches as rarely as I do, you follow them.

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"Irving, why do you take so long to answer?"

"I picked up on the first ring, Wu. How'd you manage that phone thing, anyway?"

"Software," Wu said. "I swiped the algos for handwriting recognition out of an Apple Newton and interlaced them into a GPS (Global Positioning System) satellite feed program. Then I ran your mail order consumer profile (pirated from J. Crew) through a fuzzilogical bulk-mail collator macro lifted off a zip code CD-ROM, and adjusted for the fact that you've spent the past six months in Alabama. A friend in the Mir shunts the search feeds through the communications satellite LAN until the 'IRV-' probability field collapses and the phone nearest you rings. And you pick it up. Voilá."

"I don't mean that," I said. "I mean, how'd you get Aunt Minnie to answer the phone?"

"Changed the ring!" Wu said, sounding pleased with himself. "It took a little doing, but I was able to tweak a caller ID macro enough to toggle her ringer. Made it sound like a doorbell chime. Somehow that gets her to answer. I'll send you the figures."

"Never mind," I said. "The only figure I want to see is you-know-who's in her Sweet Nothings" (Candy, who was pretending not to listen, blushed) "and yours in a white tux at noon on Thursday! There's no way we can change the wedding date."

"Can't you put it off at least a couple of days, Irv? I'm having trouble with my formula."

"Impossible!" I said. "The ice sculpture won't wait. Let the butterflies go and get on back to Huntsville. One hurricane more or less can't make all that much difference."

"Moths," said Wu. "And it's not just hurricanes. What if it rains on your wedding?"

"It won't," I said. "It can't. Cindy guarantees clear skies. It's included in the catering bill."

"Of course it is, but how do you think that works. Irving? Cindy buys weather insurance from Ido Ido, the Japanese wedding conglomerate, which contracts with Entomological Meteorological Solutions—that's us—to schedule outdoor ceremonies around the world. It's just a sideline for EMS, of course. A little tweaking. But I can't release the first moth until the coordinates are right, and my numbers are coming out slippery."

"Slippery?"

"The math doesn't work, Irv. The Time axis doesn't line up. In a system as chaotic as weather, you only have one constant, Time, and when it isn't . . ."

But we were losing our signal, and Candy was looking at me suspiciously. I hung up.

"What are all these phone calls from Wu?" she asked, as we headed downtown. "Is something wrong with the wedding plans?"

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"Absolutely not," I lied. There was no reason to spoil her Honeymoon (and mine!). "He just wants me to help him with a—a math problem."

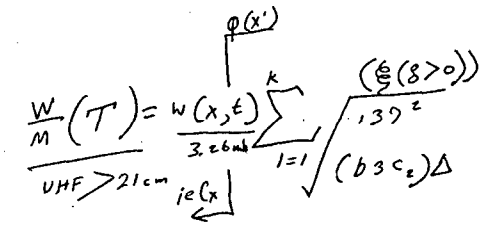
"I thought he was the math whiz. I didn't know you even took math."

I didn't, not after my sophomore year in high school. I was totally absorbed by history, inspired by my favorite teacher, Citizen Tipograph (she wanted us call her Comrade, but the principal put his foot down),who took us on field trips as far afield as Gettysburg and Harper's Ferry. Every course C.T. taught, whether it was Women's Labor History, Black Labor History, Jewish Labor History or just plain old American Labor History, included at least one trip to Union Square, and I grew to love the seedy old park, where I can still hear the clatter of the horses and the cries of the Cossacks (which is what C.T. called the cops) and the stirring strains of the *Internationale*. I tried to share some of this drama with Candy, but even though she listened politely, I could see that to her Union Square was just scrawny grass, dozing bums, and overweening squirrels.

Candy couldn't wait to get out of the park. She was far more interested in the stacked TVs in the display window at Nutty Ned's Home Electronics, on the corner of University and 14th, where dozens of Rosie O'Donnells were chatting silently with science fiction writer(s) Paul Park. There's nothing better than a talk show without sound. We both stopped to watch for a moment, when all of the screens started scrolling numbers. Over Rosie and her guest!

On a hunch, I went into the store. Candy followed.

Nutty Ned's clerks were firing wildly with remotes, trying to tune the runaway TVs. The displays all changed colors but stayed the same. It was strange, but strangely familiar:



I figured I knew what it was. And I was right. At precisely that moment, an entire FINAL SALE table of portable phones started to ring. It made a terrible noise, like a nursery filled with children who decide to cry all at once.

I picked up one and they all quit.

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"Wu? Is that you?"

"Irv, did you see my figures? I'm shunting them through the midmorn talknet comsat feed. See what I mean? I'm getting totally unlikely dates and places for these hurricanes, all down the line. Not to mention rainy weddings. And it's definitely the T."

"The T?"

"The Time axis, the constant that makes the Butterfly Effect predictable. It's become a maverick variable, too long here, too short there. Speaking of which, I wish you wouldn't make me ring you twenty times. It's annoying, and I have other things to do here, living in a treehouse, like feed the flying—"

"I picked up on the first ring."

"The hell you did! The phone rang twenty-six times."

I did a quick count of the phones on the FINAL SALE table. "Twenty-six phones rang, Wu, but they each rang only once. And all at once."

"Whoa!" said Wu. "I'm coming through in parallel? That could mean there's a twist."

"A twist?"

"A twist in local space-time. It's never happened but it's theoretically possible, of course. And it just *might* explain my slippery T axes. Have you noticed any other temporal anomalies?"

"Temporary comedies?"

"Weird time stuff, Irving! Any other weird time stuff happening there in New York? Overturned schedules! Unexpected delays!"

"Well, New York's all about delays," I said, "but as a matter of fact—" I told Wu about never having to wait for the subway. Or the bus. "Even the Fifth Avenue bus comes right away!"

"The Fifth Avenue bus! I'm beginning to think there may be more than a temporal anomaly here. We may be looking at a full-fledged chronological singularity. But I need more than your subjective impressions, Irving; I need hard numbers. Which way are you two lovebirds going?"

"Downtown," I said. "It's almost lunch time."

"Perfect!" he said. "How about Carlo's?"

When Wu and I had worked at Legal Aid, on Centre Street, we had often eaten at Carlo's Calamari in Little Italy. But only when we had time to take a *loooong* lunch.

"No way!" I said. "It takes forever to get waited on at Carlo's."

"Exactly!" said Wu.

I felt a tap on my shoulder. "You plan to buy this phone?"

It was Nutty Ned himself. I recognized his nose from the television ads.

"No way," I said.

"Than hang it the fuck up please."

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4.

"We got a menu as soon as we sat down," I said. I was speaking on the model Camaro phone at Carlo's, while Candy poked through her cold seafood salad, setting aside everything that had legs or arms or eyes, which was most of the dish.

"Impossible!" said Wu.

"We ordered and my primavera pesto pasta came right away. Maybe they have it already cooked and they just microwave it." I said this low so the waiter wouldn't hear. He had brought me the phone on a tray shaped like Sicily. It was beige, flecked with red. Dried blood? Carlo's is a mob joint. Allegedly.

"What's right away?"

"I don't know, Wu. I didn't time it."

"I need numbers, Irv! What about breadsticks? Do they still have those skinny hard breadsticks? How many did you eat between the time you ordered and the time the food came?"

"Three."

"Three apiece?"

"Three between us. Does knowing that really help?"

"Sure. I can use it either as one and one-half, or as three over two. Numbers don't lie, Irv. Parallel or serial, I'm beginning to think my T-axis problem is centered in New York. Everything there seems to be speeded up slightly. Compressed."

"Compressed," I said. When Wu is talking he expects you to respond. I always try and pick a fairly innocuous world and just repeat it.

"You've got it, Irv. It's like those interviews on TV that are a little jumpy, because they edit out all the connective time—the uhs, the ahs, the waits, the pauses. Something's happened to the connective time in New York. That's why the phone rings ten times for me here—actually an average of 8.411—and only once for you."

"How can the phone ring more times for you than for me?"

"Ever heard of Relativity, Irving?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"No buts about it!" Wu said. "Theoretically, a ninety degree twist could cause a leakage of Connective Time. But what is causing the twist? That's the . . ."

His voice was starting to fade. Truthfully, I was glad. I was ready to concentrate on my primavera pesto pasta.

"Pepper?" asked the waiter.

"Absolutely," I said. I don't really care for pepper but I admire the way they operate those big wrist-powered wooden machines.

Candy loves to shop (who doesn't?) so we headed across Grand Street

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to SoHo, looking for jeans on lower Broadway. Since there was no waiting for the dressing rooms (maybe Wu was on to something!), Candy decided to try on one pair of each brand in each style and each color. We were about a third of the way through the stack when the salesgirl began to beep; rather, her beeper did.

"Your name Irv?" she asked, studying the readout. "You can use the sales phone." It was under the counter, by the shopping bags.

"How's the coffee?" Wu asked.

"Coffee?"

"Aren't you at Dean and DeLuca?"

"We're at ZigZag Jeans."

"On Broadway at Grand? Now my fuzzilogical GPS transponder is showing slack!" Wu protested. "If I'm three blocks off already, then that means . . ."

I stopped listening. Candy had just stepped out of the dressing room to check her Levis in the store's "rear view" mirror. "What do you think?" she asked.

"Incredible," I said.

"My reaction exactly," said Wu. "But what else could it be? The bus, the breadsticks, the F train—all the numbers seem to indicate a slow leak of Connective Time somewhere in the New York metropolitan area. Let me ask you this, was your plane on time?"

"Why, yes," I said. "At the gate, as a matter of fact. The little bell went *ding* and everybody stood up at 7:32. I remember noticing it on my watch. It was our exact arrival time."

"7:32," repeated Wu. "That helps. I'm going to check the airports. I can patch into their security terminals and interlace from there to the arrival and departure monitors. I'll need a little help, though. Dmitri, are you there? He's sulking."

"Whatever," I said, giving the ZigZag girls back their phone. Candy was trying on the Wranglers, and me, I was falling in love all over again. I rarely see her out of her uniform, and it is a magnificent sight.

In the end, so to speak, it was hard to decide. The Levis, the Lees, the Wranglers, the Guess Whos, the Calvins and the Glorias all cosseted and caressed the same incredible curves. Candy decided to buy one pair of each and put them all on my credit card, since hers was maxed out. By the time the ZigZag girls had the jeans folded and wrapped and packed up in shopping bags, it was 3:30—almost time to head back to Brooklyn if we wanted to beat the rush hour. But Wu had given me an idea.

Even guys like me, who can't afford the Israeli cantaloupes or free-range Pyrenees sheep cheese at Dean and DeLuca, can spring for a cup of coffee, which you pick up at a marble counter between the vegetable and bread sections, and drink standing at tall, skinny chrome tables overlooking the rigorously fashionable intersection of Broadway and Prince.

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D&D's is my idea of class, and it seemed to appeal to Candy as well, who was back in uniform and eliciting (as usual) many an admiring glance both on the street and in the aisles. I wasn't halfway through my Americano before the butcher appeared from the back of the store with a long, skinny roll of what I thought at first was miniature butcher paper (unborn lamb chops?), but was in fact thermal paper from the old-fashioned adding machine in the meat department. The key to Dean and DeLuca's snooty charm is that everything (except of course the customers) is slightly old-fashioned. Hence, thermal paper.

"You Irv?"

I nodded.

He handed me the little scroll. I unrolled it enough to see that it was covered with tiny figures, then let it roll back up again.

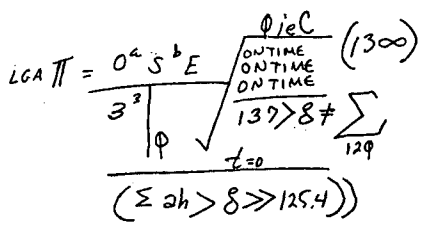
"From Wu?" Candy asked.

"Probably," I said. "But let's finish our coffee." At that very moment, a man walking down Broadway took a cellular phone out of his Armani suit, unfolded it, put it to his ear and stopped. He looked up and down the street, then in the window at me.

I nodded, somewhat reluctantly. It would have been rude, even presumptuous, to expect him to bring the phone inside the store to me, so I excused myself and went out to the street.

"Did you get my fax?" asked Wu.

"Sort of," I said. I made a spinning motion with one finger to Candy, who understood right away. She unrolled the little scroll of thermal paper and held it up the window glass:



"Well?"

"Well!" I replied. That usually satisfied Wu, but I could tell he wanted more this time. Sometimes with Wu it helps to ask a question, if you can think of an intelligent one. "What's the ON TIME ON TIME ON TIME stuff?" I asked.

"Those are airport figures, Irv! La Guardia, to be specific. All the planes are on time! That tell you something?"

"The leak is at La Guardia?" I ventured.

"Exactly! Numbers don't lie, Irv, and as those calculations clearly

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show, the connective temporal displacement at La Guardia is exactly equal to the Time axis twist I'm getting worldwide, adjusted for the earth's rotation, divided by 5.211. Which is the part I can't figure."

"I've seen that number somewhere before," I said. I dimly remembered something rolling around. "A shoe size? A phone number?"

"Try to remember," said Wu. "That number might lead us to the leak. We know it's somewhere at La Guardia; now all we have to pinpoint it. And plug it."

"Why plug it?" I said. "This no-delay business just makes life better. Who wants to wait around an airport?"

"Think about it, Irving!" Wu said. There was an edge to his voice, like when he thinks I am being stupid on purpose. In fact I am never stupid on purpose. That would be stupid. "You know how a low pressure area sucks air from other areas? It's the same with Time. The system is trying to stabilize itself. Which is why I can't get the proper EMS figures for Hurricane Relief, or Ido Ido. for that matter. Which is why I asked you to delay your wedding in the first place."

"Okay, okay," I said. I was so excited about my upcoming Honeymoon that I had totally forgotten the wedding. "So let's plug it. What do you want me to do?"

"Go to La Guardia and wait for my call," he said.

"La Guardia?!? Aunt Minnie is expecting us for supper."

"I thought she was Lifthatvanian. They can't cook!"

"They can so!" I said, more out of loyalty than conviction. "Besides, we're sending out for pizza. And besides—" I dropped my voice. "—tonight's the night Candy and I officially have our Honeymoon."

Honeymoon is one of those words you can't say without miming a kiss. Candy must have been reading my lips through the Dean & DeLuca's window, because she blushed; beautifully, I might add.

But Wu must not have heard me, because he was saying, "As soon as you get to La Guardia . . ." as his voice faded away. We were losing our connection.

Meanwhile, the guy whose phone it was was looking at his watch. It was a Movado. I recognized it from the *New Yorker* ads. I kept my subscription even after moving to Huntsville. I gave him his phone back and Candy and I headed for the subway station.

How could Wu expect me to hang out at La Guardia waiting for his call on the night of my Honeymoon? Perhaps if the Queens-bound train had come first, I might have taken it, but I don't think so. And it didn't. Taking Candy by the hand, I put us on the Brooklyn bound F. It wasn't quite rush hour, which meant we got a seat as soon as we reached Delancey Street. Did I mention that the train came right away?

Even though (or perhaps because) I am a born and bred New Yorker, I

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get a little nervous when the train stops in the tunnel under the East River. This one started and stopped, started and stopped.

Then stopped.

The lights went out.

They came back on.

"There is a grumbasheivous willin brashabrashengobrak our signal," said the loudspeaker. "Please wooshagranny the delay."

"What did she say?" asked Candy. "Is something wrong?"

"Don't worry about it," I said.

Turns out we were in the conductor's car. The lights flickered but stayed on, and she stepped out of her tiny compartment, holding a phone. "Ashabroshabikus Irving?" she asked.

I nodded.

"Frezzhogristis quick," she said, handing me the phone.

"Hello?" I ventured. I knew who it was, of course.

"Irv, I need you in baggage claim," said Wu.

"In what?"

"I'm closing in on the Connective Time leak. I think it's a phone somewhere on the Baggage Claim and Ground Transportation level. I need you to go down there and see which payphone is off the hook, so we can . . . what's that noise?"

"That's the train starting up again," I said.

"Train? I thought you were at the airport."

"I tried to tell you, Wu," I said. "We promised Aunt Minnie we would come home for dinner. Plus tonight's my Honeymoon. Plus, you're not looking for a pay phone."

"How do you know?"

"The 5.211. Now I remember what it was. It was a battery for a cell phone. It was rolling and I stopped it with my foot."

"Of course!" said Wu. "What a fool I am! And you, Irv, are a genius! Don't make a move until I . . ."

But we were losing our signal.

"Make if sharanka bresh?" asked the conductor, a little testily. She took her phone and stepped back into her tiny compartment and closed the door.

5.

Every bad pizza is bad in its own way, but good pizza is all alike. Bruno's on the corner of Ditmas and MacDonald, under the el, is my favorite, and Aunt Minnie's too. A fresh pie was being popped into the oven as Candy and I walked in the door, and Bruno, Jr., assured us it was ours.

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We were headed for home, box in hand, when a battered Buick gypsy cab pulled up at the curb. I waved it off, shaking my head, figuring the driver thought we'd flagged him down. But that wasn't it.

The driver powered down his window and I heard Wu's voice over the static on the two-way radio: "Irv, you can head for Brooklyn after all. I found it. Irv, you there?"

The driver was saying something in Egyptian and trying to hand me a little mike. I gave Candy the pizza to hold, and took it.

"Press the little button," said Wu.

I pressed the little button. "Found what?"

"The leak. The 5.211 was the clue," said Wu. "I should have recognized it immediately as a special two-year cadmium silicone battery for a low-frequency, high-intensity, short-circuit, long-distance cellular phone. Once you tipped me off, I located the phone hidden underneath the old Eastern/Braniff/Pan Am/Piedmont/People baggage carousel."

"I know," I said, pressing the little button. "I saw it there. So now I guess you want me to go to La Guardia and hang it up?"

"Not so fast, Irv! The phone is just the conduit, the timeline through which the Connective Time is being drained. What we need to find is the number the phone is calling—the source of the leak, the actual hole in Time, the twist. It could be some bizarre natural singularity, like a chronological whirlpool or tornado; or even worse, some incredibly advanced, diabolical machine, designed to twist a hole in space-time and pinch off a piece of our Universe. The open phone connection will lead us to it, whatever it is, and guess what?"

"What?"

"The number it's calling is in Brooklyn, and guess what?"

"What?"

"It's the phone number of Dr. Radio Dgjerm!"

He pronounced it rah-dio. I said, "Help me out."

"The world-famous Lifthatvanian resort developer, Irving!" said Wu, impatiently. "Winner of the Nobel Prize for Real Estate in 1982! Remember?"

"Oh, him. Sort of," I lied.

"Which was later revoked when he was indicted for trying to create an illegal Universe, but that's another story. And guess what?"

"What?"

"He lives somewhere on Ditmas, near your aunt, as a matter of fact. We're still trying to pinpoint the exact address."

"What a coincidence," I said. "We're on Ditmas right now. We just picked up a pizza."

"With what?"

"Mushrooms and peppers on one side, for Aunt Minnie. Olives and

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sausage on the other, for Candy. I pick at both, since I like mushrooms and sausage."

"What a coincidence," said Wu. "I like it with olives and peppers." He sighed. "I would kill for a hot pizza. Ever spend six weeks in a treehouse?"

"Ever spend six months in a space station?" asked a strangely accented voice.

"Butt out, Dmitri," Wu said (rather rudely, I thought). "Aren't you supposed to be looking for that address?"

"I spent three nights in a treehouse once," I said. "Me and Studs. Of course, we had a TV."

"A TV in a treehouse?"

"Just black and white. It was an old six-inch Dumont from my Uncle Mort's basement."

"A six-inch Dumont!" said Wu. "Of course! What a fool I am! Irv, did it have . . ."

But we were losing our signal. Literally. The driver of the gypsy cab was leaning out of his window, shouting in Egyptian and reaching for the phone.

"Probably has a fare to pick up," I explained to Candy as he snatched the little mike out of my hand and drove off, burning rubber. "Let's get this pizza to Aunt Minnie before it gets cold. Otherwise she'll cook. And she can't."

Different cultures deal with death, dying, and the dead in different ways. I was accustomed to Aunt Minnie's Lifthatvanian eccentricities, but I was concerned about how Candy would take it when she set Uncle Mort's ashes at the head of the table for dinner.

Candy was cool, though. As soon as supper was finished, she helped Aunt Minnie with the dishes (not much of a job), and joined her on the front porch for her Kent. And, I supposed, girl talk. I took the opportunity to go upstairs and strap the legs of the twin beds together with the $1.99 Honeymoon Bungee I had bought in Little Korea. The big evening was almost upon us! There on the dresser was the sleek little package from Sweet Nothings: Candy's Honeymoon negligee. I was tempted to look inside, but of course I didn't.

I wanted to be surprised. I wanted everything to be perfect.

From the upstairs window I could see the big maple tree in Studs's backyard. It was getting dark, and blue light spilled out through every crack in the treehouse, of which there were many.

I heard the doorbell chime. That seemed strange, since I knew Candy and Aunt Minnie were on the front porch. Then I realized it was the phone. I ran downstairs to pick it up.

"Diagonal, right?"

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"What?"

"The screen, Irving! On the Dumont you had in the treehouse. You said it was six-inch. Was that measured diagonally?"

"Of course," I said. "It's always measured diagonally. Wu, what's this about?"

"Blonde cabinet?"

"Nice blonde veneer," I said. "The color of a Dreamsicle™. It was a real old set. It was the first one Aunt Minnie and Uncle Mort had bought back in the fifties. It even had little doors you could close when you weren't watching it. I always thought the little doors were to keep the cowboys from getting out."

"Cowboys in Brooklyn?" asked a strangely accented voice.

"Butt out, Dmitri," Wu said. "Irv, you are a genius. We have found the twist."

"I am? We have?"

"Indubitably. Remember the big Dumont console payola recall scandal of 1957?"

"Not exactly. I wasn't born yet. Neither were you."

"Well, it wasn't *really* about payola at all. It was about something far more significant. Quantum physics. Turns out that the #515 gauge boson rectifier under the 354V67 vacuum tube in the Dumont six-inch console had a frequency modulation that set up an interference wave of 8.48756 gauss, which, when hooked up to household 110, opened an oscillating 88 degree offset permeability in the fabric of the space-time continuum."

"A twist?"

"Exactly. And close enough to ninety degrees to make a small leak. It was discovered, quite by accident, by a lowly assistant at Underwriters Laboratory eleven months after the sets had gone on the market. Shipped. Sold."

"I don't remember ever hearing about it."

"How could you? It was covered up by the powers-that-be; rather, that-were; indeed, that-still-are. Can you imagine the panic if over a quarter of a million people discovered that the TV set in their living room was pinching a hole in the Universe? Even a tiny one? It would have destroyed the industry in its infancy. You better believe it was hushed up, Irv. Deep-sixed. Then 337,877 sets were recalled and destroyed, their blonde wood cabinets broken up for kindling, their circuits melted down for new pennies, and their #515 gauge boson rectifiers sealed in glass and buried in an abandoned salt mine 1200 feet under East Gramling, West Virginia."

"So what are you saying? One got away?"

"Exactly, Irv. Only 337,877 were destroyed, but 337,878 were manufactured. Numbers don't lie. Do the math."

"Hmmmm," I said. "Could be that Aunt Minnie missed the recall. She

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hardly ever opens her mail, you know. Studs and I found the set in Uncle Mort's basement workshop. It hadn't been used for years, but it seemed to work okay. We didn't notice it twisting any hole in Time."

"Of course not. It's a tiny hole. But over a long period, it would have a cumulative effect. Precisely the effect we are seeing, in fact. Many millions of connective milli-seconds have been drained out of our Universe—perhaps even stolen deliberately, for all we know."

I was relieved. If it was a crime, I was off the hook. I could concentrate on my Honeymoon, "Then let's call the police," I said.

Wu just laughed. "The police aren't prepared to deal with anything like this, Irv. This is quantum physics, Feynman stuff, way beyond them. We will have to handle it ourselves. When Dmitri finds the address for Dr. Dgjerm, I have a suspicion we will also find out what became of the legendary Lost D6."

"Isn't this a bit of a coincidence?" I asked. "What are the odds that the very thing that is messing you up in Quetzalcan is right here in my old neighborhood in Brooklyn? It seems unlikely."

"That's because you don't understand probability, Irving," said Wu. "Everything is unlikely until it happens. Look at it this way: when there's a 10 percent chance of rain, there's a 90 percent chance it won't rain, right?"

"Right."

"Then what if it starts raining? The probability wave collapses, and the ten percent becomes a hundred, the ninety becomes zero. An unlikely event becomes a certainty."

It made sense to me. "Then it's raining here, Wu," I said. "The probability waves are collapsing like crazy, because the TV you are looking for is still in the treehouse. Turned on, in fact. I can see the blue light from here. It's in the maple tree in Studs's backyard, three doors down."

"On Ditmas?"

"On Ditmas."

"So your friend Studs could be involved?"

"That's what I was trying to tell you!" I said. "He runs the baggage carousel at La Guardia that the phone was hidden under."

"The plot thickens," said Wu, who loves it when the plot thickens. "He must be draining off the connective time to speed up his baggage delivery! But where is it going? And what is Dgjerm's role in this caper? We'll know soon enough."

"We will?"

"When you confront them, Irv, at the scene of the crime, so to speak. You said it was only two doors away."

"No way," I said. "Not tonight."

"Why not?"

"Guess who?" I felt hands over my eyes.

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"Candy, that's why," I said.

"Right you are!" Candy said. She blushed (even her fingertips blush) and her voice dropped to a whisper. "Coming upstairs?"

"You mean your Honeymoon?" Wu asked.

"Yes, of course I mean my Honeymoon!" I said, as I watched Candy kiss Aunt Minnie goodnight and go upstairs. "I don't want to confront anybody! Any guys, anyway. Can't you just turn the TV off by remote?"

"There's no remote on those old Dumonts, Irv. You're going to have to unplug it."

"Tomorrow, then."

"Tonight," said Wu. "It'll only take you a few minutes. If the leak is plugged tonight I can redo my calculations and release the first moth in the morning. Then if I catch the nonstop from Quetzalcan City, I'll make Huntsville in time to pick up my tux. But if I don't, you won't have a Best Man. Or a ring. Or maybe even a wedding. Don't forget, this moth works for Ido Ido, too. What if it rains?"

"Okay, okay," I said. "You convinced me. But I'm just going to run over there and unplug it and that's all." I kissed Aunt Minnie goodnight (she sleeps in the barcalounger in front of the TV with Uncle Mort's ashes in her lap), then called up the stairs to Candy, "Be up in a minute!"

Then headed out the back door.

6.

I'll never forget the first time I visited my cousin Lucy in New Jersey. Lots of things in the suburbs were different. The trees were skinnier, the houses were lower, the cars were newer, the streets were wider, the yards were bigger and the grass was definitely greener. But the main thing I remember was my feeling of panic: there was nowhere to hide. The picture windows, one on each house, seemed to stare out onto a world in which nobody had anything to conceal, a terrifying idea to a preteen (I was eleven going on fifteen) since adolescence is the slow, unfolding triumph of experience over innocence, and teens have everything to hide.

I was glad to get back to Brooklyn, where everyone knew who I was but no one was watching me. I had the same safe feeling when I slipped out the kitchen door into Aunt Minnie's tiny (and sadly neglected) backyard. The yards in Brooklyn, on Ditmas at least, are narrow slivers separated by board fences, wire fences, slat fences, mesh fences. Adulthood in America doesn't involve a lot of fence climbing, and I felt like a kid again as I hauled myself carefully over a sagging section of chainlink into the Murphys' yard next door.

Of course, they weren't the Murphys anymore: they were the Wing-

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Tang somethings, and they had replaced the old squealing swing set with a new plastic and rubberoid play center in the shape of a pirate ship, complete with plank.

The next yard, the Patellis', was even less familiar. It had always been choked with flowers and weeds in a dizzying, improbable mix, under a grape arbor that, properly processed, kept the grandfather mildly potted all year. The vines had stopped bearing when "Don Patelli" had died, the year I started high school. "Grapes are like dogs," Uncle Mort had said. "Faithful to the end." Everything Uncle Mort knew about dogs, he had learned from books.

A light came on in the house, and I remembered with alarm that the Patellis no longer lived there, and that I was no longer a neighborhood kid; or even a kid. If anybody saw me, they would call the police. I stepped back into the shadows. Looking up, and back a house or two, I spotted a shapely silhouette behind the blinds in an upstairs window. A girl undressing for bed! I enjoyed the guilty, Peeping Tom feeling, until I realized it was Candy, in Aunt Minnie's guest room. That made it even better.

But it was time to get moving. Unplug the stupid TV and be done with it.

The loose plank in the Patellis' ancient board fence still swung open to let me through. It was a little tighter fit, but I made it—and I was in the Blitzes' yard, under the wide, ivy-covered trunk of the maple. The board steps Studs and I had nailed to the tree were still there, but I was glad to see that they had been had been supplemented with a ten foot aluminum ladder.

At the top of the ladder, wedged into a low fork, was the treehouse Studs and I had built in the summer of 1968. It was a triangular shed about six feet high and five feet on a side, nailed together from scrap plywood and pallet lumber. It was hard to believe it was still intact after almost thirty years. Yet, there it was.

And here I was. There were no windows, but through the cracks, I saw a blue light.

I climbed up the aluminum ladder. The door, a sheet of faux-birch paneling, was padlocked from the outside. I even recognized the padlock. Before opening it, I looked in through the wide crack at the top. I was surprised by what I saw.

Usually, when you return to scenes of your childhood, whether it's an elementary school or a neighbor's yard, everything seems impossibly small. That's what I thought it would be like with the treehouse Studs and I had built when we were eleven. I expected it to look tiny inside.

Instead it looked huge.

I blinked and looked again. The inside of the treehouse seemed as big as a gym. In the near corner, to the right, I saw the TV—the six-inch Du-

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mont console. The doors were open and the gray-blue light from the screen illuminated the entire vast interior of the treehouse. In the far corner, to the left, which seemed at least a half a block away, there was a brown sofa next to a potted palm.

I didn't like the looks of it. My first impulse was to climb down the ladder and go home. I even started down one step. Then I looked behind me, toward Aunt Minnie's upstairs guest room window, where I had seen Candy's silhouette. The light was out. She was in bed, waiting for me. Waiting to begin our Honeymoon.

All I had to do was unplug the damn TV.

It's funny how the fingers remember what the mind forgets. The combination lock was from my old middle school locker. As soon as I started spinning the dial, my fingers knew where to start and where to stop: L5, R32, L2.

I opened the lock and set it aside, hanging it on the bracket. I leaned back and pulled the door open. I guess I expected it to groan or creak in acknowledgment of the years since I had last opened it; but it made not a sound.

The last step is a long one, and I climbed into the treehouse on my knees. It smelled musty, like glue and wood and old magazines. I left the door swinging open behind me. The plywood floor creaked reassuringly as I got to my feet.

The inside of the treehouse looked huge, but it didn't *feel* huge. The sofa and the potted palm in the far corner seemed almost like miniatures that I could reach out and touch if I wanted to. I didn't want to. They sort of hung in the air, either real small, or real far away, or both. Or neither.

I decided it was best not to look at them. I had a job to do.

Two steps across the plywood floor took me to the corner with the TV. It was better here; more familiar. Here was the ratty rag rug my mother had donated; the Farrah Fawcett pinups on the wall. Here was the stack of old magazines: *Motor Trend, Boy's Life, Playboy, Model Airplane News.* Here were the ball gloves, the water guns, right where Studs and I had left them, almost thirty years before. It all looked the same, in this corner.

The TV screen was more gray than blue. There was no picture, just a steady blizzard of static and snow. The rabbit ears antenna on the top were extended. One end was hung with tinfoil (had Studs and I done that?), and something was duct-taped into the cradle between them.

A cellular phone. I was *sure* we hadn't done that. They didn't even have cellular phones when we were kids; or duct tape, for that matter. This was clearly the other end of the connection from La Guardia. And there was more that was new.

A green garden hose was attached to a peculiar fitting on the front of the TV, between the volume control and the channel selector. It snaked

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across the floor toward the corner with the brown sofa and the potted palm. The longer I looked at the hose, the longer it seemed.

I decided it was best not to look at it. I had a job to do.

The electrical power in the treehouse came from the house, via a "train" of extension cords winding through the branches from Studs's upstairs window. The TV was plugged into an extension cord dangling through a hole in the ceiling. I was reaching up to unplug it when I felt something cold against the back of my neck.

"Put your hands down!"

"Studs?"

"Irv, is that you?"

I turned slowly, hands still in the air.

"Irv the Perv? What the hell are you doing here?"

"I came to unplug the television, Studs," I said. "Is that a real gun?"

"Damn tootin'," he said. "A Glock nine."

"So this is how you got all your medals!" I said scornfully. My hands still in the air, I pointed with my chin to the six-inch Dumont with the cell phone taped between the rabbit ears, then to the impressive array across Studs's chest. Even off duty, even at home, he wore his uniform with all his medals. "That's not really *your* Nobel Prize around your neck, either, is it?"

"It is so!" he said, fingering the heavy medallion. "The professor gave it to me. The professor helped me win the others, too, by speeding up the baggage carousel at La Guardia. You're looking at the Employee of the Year, two years in a row."

"The professor?"

Studs pointed with the Glock nine to the other corner of the treehouse. The far corner. I was surprised to see an old man, sitting on the brown sofa next to the potted palm. He was wearing a grey cardigan over blue coveralls. "Where'd he come from?" I asked.

"He comes and goes as he pleases," said Studs. "It's his Universe."

Universe? Suddenly it all came perfectly clear; or almost clear. "Dr. Radio Dgjerm?"

"Rah-dio," the old man corrected. He looked tiny but his voice sounded neither small nor far away.

"Mother took in boarders after dad died," Studs explained. "One day I showed Dr. Dgjerm the old treehouse, and when he saw the TV he got all excited. Especially when he turned it on and saw that it still worked. He bought the cell phones and set up the system."

"It doesn't really work," I said. "There's no picture."

"All those old black and white shows are off the air," said Studs. "Dr. Dgjerm had bigger things in mind than *I Love Lucy* anyway. Like creating a new Universe."

"Is that what's swelling up the inside of the treehouse?" I asked.

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Studs nodded. "And incidentally, helping my career." His medals clinked as his chest expanded. "You're looking at the Employee of the Year, two years in a row."

"You already told me that," I said. I looked at the old man on the sofa. "Is he real small, or far away?"

"Both," said Studs. "He's in another Universe, and it's not a very big universe."

"Not big *yet!*" said Dr. Dgjerm. His voice sounded neither tiny nor far away. It boomed in my ear; I found out later, from Wu, that even a small Universe can act as a sort of resonator or echo chamber. Like a shower.

"My Universe is small now, but it's getting bigger," Dr. Dgjerm went on. "It's a leisure Universe, created entirely out of Connective Time that your Universe will never miss. In another year or so, it will attain critical mass and be big enough to survive on its own. Then I will disconnect the timelines, cast loose, and bid you all farewell!"

"We don't have another year," I said. "I have to unplug the TV now." I explained about the Butterfly Effect and the hurricanes. I even explained about my upcoming wedding in Huntsville. (I left out the part about my Honeymoon, which was supposed to be going on right now, as we spoke, just three doors down and a half a floor up!)

"Congratulations," said Dgjerm in his rich Lifthatvanian accent. "But I'm afraid I can't allow you to unplug the D6. There are more than a few hurricanes and weddings at stake. We're talking about an entire new Universe here. Shoot him, Arthur."

Studs raised the Glock nine until it was pointed it directly at my face. His hand was alarmingly steady.

"I don't want to shoot you, Irv," he said apologetically. "But I owe him. He made me Employee of the Year two years in a row."

"You also took a sacred oath!" I said. "Remember? You can't shoot another Ditmas Playboy!" This wasn't just a last-ditch ploy to save my life. It was true. It was one of our by-laws; one of only two, in fact.

"That was a long time ago," said Studs, looking confused.

"Time doesn't matter to oaths," I said. (I have no idea if this is true or not. I just made it up on the spot.)

"Shoot him!" said Dr. Dgjerm.

"There's another way out of this," said a voice behind us.

7.

"A more civilized way."

Studs and I both turned and looked at the TV. There was a familiar (to me, at least; Studs had never met him) face in grainy black and white, wearing some sort of jungle cap.

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"Wu!" I said. "Where'd you come from?"

"Real time Internet feed," he said. "Video conferencing software. My cosmonaut friend patched me in on a rogue cable channel from a digital switching satellite. Piece of cake, once we triangulated the location through the phone signals. Although cellular video can be squirrelly. Lots of frequency bounce."

"This is a treehouse? It's as big as a gymnasium!" exclaimed an oddly accented voice.

"Shut up, Dmitri. We've got a situation here. Hand me the gun, Blitz."

"You can see *out of* a TV?" I asked, amazed.

"Only a little," Wu said. "Pixel inversion piggybacked on the remote locational electron smear. It's like a reverse mortgage. Feeds on the electronic equity, so to speak, so we have to get on with it. Hand me the gun, Studs. The Glock nine."

Studs was immobile, torn between conflicting loyalties. "How can I hand a gun to a guy on TV?" he whined.

"You could set it on top of the cabinet," I suggested.

"Don't do it, Arthur!" Dr. Dgjerm broke in. "Give the gun to me. Now!"

Studs was saved. The doctor had given him an order he could obey. He tossed the Glock nine across the treehouse. It got smaller and smaller and went slower and slower, until, to my surprise, Dr. Dgjerm caught it. He checked the clip and laid the gun across his tiny, or distant, or both, lap.

"We can settle this without gunplay," said Wu.

"Wilson Wu," said Dr. Dgjerm. "So we meet again!"

"Again?" I whispered, surprised. I shouldn't have been.

"I was Dr. Dgjerm's graduate assistant at Bay Ridge Realty College in the late seventies," explained Wu. "Right before he won the Nobel Prize for Real Estate."

"Which was then stolen from me!" said Dr. Dgjerm.

"The prize was later revoked by the King of Sweden," explained Wu, "when Dr. Dgjerm was indicted for trying to create an illegal Universe out of unused vacation time. Unfairly, I thought, even though technically the Time did belong to the companies."

"The charges were dropped," said Dgjerm. "But try telling that to the King of Sweden."

Studs fingered the Nobel Prize medallion. "It's not real?"

"Of course it's real!" said Dgjerm. "When you clink it, it clinks. It has mass. That's why I refused to give it back."

"Your scheme would never have worked, anyway, Dr. Dgjerm," said Wu. "I did the numbers. There's not enough unused vacation time to inflate a Universe; not anymore."

"You always were my best student, Wu," said Dgjerm. "You are right, as usual. But as you can see, I came up with a better source of Time than puny pilfered corporate vacation days." He waved his hand around at the

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sofa, the potted palm. "Connective Time! There's more than enough to go around. All I needed was a way to make a hole in the fabric of space-time big enough to slip it through. And I found it!"

"The D6," said Wu.

"Exactly. I had heard of the legendary lost D6, of course, but I thought it was a myth. Imagine my surprise and delight when I found it in my own backyard, so to speak! With Arthur's help, it was a simple bandwidth problem, sluicing the Connective Time by phone from La Guardia, where it would never be missed, through the D6's gauge boson rectifier twist, and into—my own Universe!"

"But it's just a sofa and a plant," I said. "Why do you want to live there?"

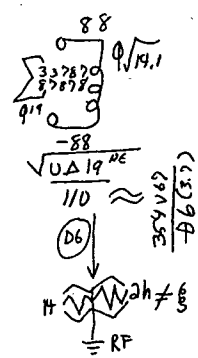
"Does the word 'immortality' mean anything to you?" Dgjerm asked scornfully. "It's true that my Leisure Universe is small. That's okay; the world is not yet ready for vacationing in another Universe, anyway. But real estate is nothing if not a waiting game. It will get bigger. And while I am waiting, I age at a very slow rate. Life in a universe made entirely of Connective Time is as close to immortality as we mortals can come."

"Brilliant," said Wu. "If you would only use your genius for science instead of gain, you could win another Nobel Prize."

"Fuck Science!" said Dgjerm, his tiny (or distant, or both) mouth twisted into a smirk as his giant voice boomed through the treehouse. "I want my own Universe, and I already got a Nobel Prize, so don't anybody reach for that plug. Sorry if I've thrown off your butterfly figures, Wilson, but your Universe won't miss a few more milli-minutes of Connective Time. I will disconnect mine when it is big enough to survive and grow on its own. Not before."

"That's what I'm trying to tell you!" said Wu. "The more Universes, the better, as far as I'm concerned. Look here . . ."

Wu's face on the TV screen stared straight ahead, as a stream of equations flowed down over it:



"Impossible!" said Dgjerm.

"Numbers don't lie," said Wu. "Your figures were off, professor. You reached critical mass 19.564 minutes ago, our time. Your Leisure Universe is ready to cut loose and be born. All Irv has to do is—"

"Unplug the TV?" I asked. I reached for the plug and a shot rang out.

BRANNNGGG!

It was followed by the sound of breaking glass.

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CRAASH!

"You killed him!" shouted Studs.

At first I thought he meant me, but my head felt okay, and my hands were okay, one on each side of the still-connected plug. Then I saw the thick broken glass on the floor, and I knew what had happened. You know how sometimes when you fire a warning shot indoors, you hit an appliance? Well, that's what Dr. Dgjerm had done. He had meant to warn me away from the plug, and hit the television. The D6 was no more. The screen was shattered and Wu was gone.

I looked across the treehouse for the sofa, the potted palm, the little man. They were flickering a little, but still there.

"You killed him!" Studs said again.

"It was an accident," said Dgjerm. "It was meant to be a warning shot."

"It was only a video conferencing image," I said. "I'm sure Wu is fine. Besides, he was right!"

"Right?" they both asked at once.

I pointed at Dr. Dgjerm. "The TV is off, and your Universe is still there."

"For now," said Dgjerm. "But the timeline is still open, and the Connective Time is siphoning back into your universe." As he spoke, he was getting either smaller or farther away, or both. His voice was sounding hollower and hollower.

"What should we do?" Studs asked frantically. "Hang up the phone?"

I was way ahead of him; I had already untaped the phone and was looking for the OFF button. As soon as I pushed it, the phone rang.

It was, of course, Wu. "Everything all right?" he asked. "I lost my connection."

I told him what had happened. Meanwhile, Dr. Dgjerm was getting smaller and smaller every second. Or farther and farther away. Or both.

"You have to act fast!" Wu said. "A universe is like a balloon. You have to tie it off, or it'll shrink into nothing."

"I know," I said. "That's why I hung up the phone."

"Wrong timeline. The phone connects the baggage carousel to the D6. There must be another connection from the D6 to Dr. Dgjerm's Leisure Universe. That's the one that's still open. Look for analog, narrow bandwidth, probably green."

Dr. Dgjerm was standing on the tiny sofa, pointing frantically toward the front of the TV.

"Like a garden hose?" I asked.

"Could be," said Wu. "If so, kinking it won't help. Time isn't like water; it's infinitely compressible. You'll have to disconnect it."

The hose was attached to a peculiar brass fitting on the front of the set, between the channel selector and the volume control. I tried unscrewing

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it. I turned it to the left, but nothing happened. I turned it to the right, but nothing happened. I pushed. I pulled.

Nothing happened

"It's a special fitting!" said Dgjerm. I could barely hear him. He was definitely getting smaller, or farther away, or both.

"Let me try it!" said Studs, his panic showing his genuine affection for the swiftly disappearing old man. He turned the fitting to the left; he turned it to the right. He pushed, he pulled; he tugged, he twisted.

Nothing happened.

"Can I try?" asked a familiar voice.

"She can't come in here!" shouted Studs.

It was Candy, and Studs was right: No Girls Allowed was our other by-law. It was the bedrock of our policy. Nevertheless, ignoring his protests, I helped her off the ladder and through the door. Studs and I both gasped as she stood up, brushing off her knees. I had seen Candy out of uniform, but this was different. Very different.

She was wearing her special Honeymoon lingerie from Sweet Nothings.

Nevertheless, she was all business. "It's like a child-proof cap," she said. She bent down (beautifully!), and with one quick mysterious wrist-motion, disconnected the hose from the fitting. It began to flop like a snake and boom like thunder, and Candy screamed and dropped it. Meanwhile, Dr. Dgjerm was hauling the hose in and coiling it on the sofa, which was beginning to spin, slowly at first, then more and more slowly.

I heard more booming, and felt a tremendous wind sweep through the treehouse.

I heard the sound of magazine pages fluttering and wood splintering.

I felt the floor tilt and I reached out for Candy as Studs yelled, "I told you so! I told you so!"

The next thing I knew, I was lying on a pile of boards under the maple tree, with Candy in my arms. Her Sweet Nothings Honeymoon lingerie was short on elbow and knee protection, and she was skinned in several places. I wrapped her in my mother's old rag rug, and together we helped Studs to his feet.

"I told you so," he said.

"Told who what?"

Instead of answering, he swung at me. Luckily, he missed. Studs has never been much of a fighter. "The by-laws. No Girls Allowed. Now look!" Studs kicked the magazines scattered around under the tree.

"It wasn't Candy!" I said. "It was your precious professor and his Leisure Universe!"

Studs swung at me again. It was easy enough to duck. A few lights had come on in the neighboring houses, but they were already going off again.

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The backyard was littered with boards and magazines, ball gloves, pin-ups, water guns and pocket knives. It was like the debris of childhood—it *was* the debris of childhood—all collected in one sad pile.

Studs was crying, blubbering, really, as he picked through the debris, looking (I suspected) for a little sofa, a miniature potted palm, or perhaps a tiny man knocked unconscious by a fall from a collapsing Universe.

Candy and I watched for a while, then decided to help. There was no sign of Dr. Radio Dgjerm. We couldn't even find the hose. "That's a good sign," I pointed out. "The last thing I saw, he was coiling it up on the sofa."

"So?" Studs took another swing at me, and Candy and I decided it was time to leave. We were ducking down to squeeze through the loose plank in the Patellis' fence when I heard the phone ringing behind me. It was muffled under the boards and plywood. I was about to turn back and answer it, but Candy caught my arm—and my eye.

It was still our Honeymoon, after all, even though I had a headache from the fall. So, I found out later, did Candy.

8.

I thought that was the end of the Ditmas Playboys, but the next day at La Guardia, Studs was waiting for us at the top of the escalator to Gates 1-17. He had either cleaned or changed his uniform since the disaster of the night before, and his medals gleamed, though I noticed he had taken off the Nobel Prize

At first I thought he was going to take a swing at me, but instead he took my hand.

"Your friend Wu called last night," he said. "Right after you and what's-her-name left."

"Candy." I said. "My fiancée." She and Aunt Minnie were standing right beside me, but Studs wouldn't look at them. Studs had always had a hard time with girls and grown-ups—which is why I was surprised that he had become so attached to Dr. Dgjerm. Perhaps it was because the brilliant but erratic Lifthatvanian Realtor was, or seemed, so small, or far away, or both.

"Whatever," said Studs. "Anyway, your friend told me that, as far as he could tell, the Leisure Universe was cast loose and set off safely. That Dr. Dgjerm survived."

"Congratulations," I said. "Now if you'll excuse me, we have a plane to catch."

"What a nice boy that Arthur is," said Aunt Minnie, as we boarded the plane. I felt no need to respond, since she was talking to Uncle Mort and not to me. "And you should see all those medals."

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The departure was late. I found that oddly reassuring. Candy sat in the middle, her eyes tightly closed, and I let Aunt Minnie have the window seat. It was her first flight. She pressed the urn with Uncle Mort's ashes to the window for the takeoff.

"It's his first flight," she said. "I read in *Reader's Digest* that you're less nervous when you can see what's going on."

"I don't believe it," muttered Candy, her eyes closed tightly. "And how can ashes be nervous anyway?"

The planes may be old on PreOwned Air, but the interiors have been re-refurbished several times. They even have the little credit card phones on the backs of the seats. There was nobody I wanted to talk to for fifteen dollars a minute, but I wasn't surprised when my phone rang.

"It's me. Did the plane leave late?"

"Eighteen minutes," I said, checking my notes.

"Numbers don't lie!" said Wu. "Things are back to normal. I already knew it, in fact, because my calculations came out perfect this morning. I released the first moth in the rain forest at 9:14 AM, Eastern Standard Time."

I heard a roar behind him which I assumed was rain.

"Congratulations," I said. "What about Dr. Dgjerm and his Leisure Universe?"

"It looks like the old man made it okay," said Wu. "If his Universe had crashed, my figures wouldn't have come out so good. Of course, we will never know for sure. Now that our Universe and his are separated, there can be no exchange of information between them. Not even light."

"Doesn't sound like a good bet for a resort," I said.

"Dgjerm didn't think it all the way through," said Wu. "This was always his weakness as a Realtor. However, he will live forever, or almost forever, and that was important to him also. Your friend Studs cried with relief, or sadness, or both when I told him last night. He seems very attached to the old man."

"He's not exactly a friend," I said. "More like a childhood acquaintance."

"Whatever," said Wu. "How was your Honeymoon?"

I told him about the headache(s). Wu and I have no secrets. I had to whisper, since I didn't want to upset Candy. She might have been asleep, but there was no way to tell; her eyes had been closed since we had started down the runway.

"Well, you can always try again after the ceremony," Wu commiserated.

"I intend to," I said. "Just make sure you get to Huntsville on time with the ring!"

"It'll be tight, Irv. I'm calling from a trimotor just leaving Quetzalcan City."

"An L1011? A DC-10?" The roar sounded louder than ever.

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"A Ford Trimotor," Wu said. "I missed the nonstop, and it's a charter, the only thing I could get. It'll be tight. We can only make 112 mph."

"They stopped making Ford Trimotors in 1929. How can they have cell phones?"

"I'm in the cockpit, on the radio. The pilot, Huan Juan, and I went to Flight School together in Mukden."

Why was I not surprised? I leaned over to look out the window, and saw the familiar runways of Squirrel Ridge, the airport, far below.

"We're getting ready to land," I said. "I'll see you at the wedding!"

I hung up the phone. Aunt Minnie held the urn up to the window. Candy shut her eyes even tighter.

9.

Divorces are all alike, according to Dostoievsky, or some Russian, but marriages are each unique, or different, or something. Our wedding was no exception.

It started off great. There's nothing like a morning ceremony. My only regret was that Candy couldn't get the whole day off.

The weather was perfect. The sun shone down from a cloudless sky on the long, level lawn of the Squirrel Ridge Holiness Church. Cindy's catering van arrived at ten, and she and the two kids, Ess and Em, started unloading folding tables and paper plates, plastic toothpicks and cut flowers, and coolers filled with crab cakes and ham biscuits for the open-air lunchtime reception.

All Candy's friends from the Huntsville Parks Department were there, plus the friends we had in common, like Bonnie from the Bonny Baguette (who brought her little blackboard with the daily specials written on it; it was like her brain) and Buzzer from Squirrel Ridge, the Nursing Home, complete with diamond nose stud. My friend Hoppy from Hoppy's Good Gulf, who happened to be a Holiness preacher, was officiating. ("Course I'll marry Whipper Will's young-un to Whipper Will's Yank, 'nuff said.").

Aunt Minnie looked lovely in her colorful Lifthatvanian peasant costume (red and blue, with pink lace around the sleeves) smelling faintly of mothballs. Even Uncle Mort sported a gay ribbon round his urn.

It was all perfect, except—where was Wu?

"He'll be here," said Cindy as she unpacked the ice sculpture of Robert E. Lee's horse, Traveler (the only thing the local ice sculptor knew how to do), and sent Ess and Em to arrange the flowers near the altar.

"He's on a very slow plane," I said.

Finally, we felt like we had to get started, Best Man or no. It was 11:55 and the guests were beginning to wilt. I gave a reluctant nod and the twin fiddles struck up "The Wedding March"—

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And here came the bride. I hadn't seen Candy since the night before. She looked resplendent in her dress white uniform, complete with veil, her medals gleaming in the sun. Her bridesmaids all wore khaki and pink.

Since I was short a ring, Hoppy slipped me the rubber O-ring from the front pump of a Ford C-6 transmission. "Use this, Yank," he whispered. "You can replace it with the real one later."

"Brethren and sistren and such, we are gathered here today . . ." Hoppy began. Then he sniffed, and cocked his head, and looked around. "Is that a Ford?"

It was indeed. There is nothing that stops a wedding like a "Tin Goose" setting down on a church lawn. Those fat-winged little birds can land almost anywhere.

This one taxied up between the ham biscuit and punch tables, and shut down all three engines with a couple of backfires and a loud *cough-cough*. The silence was deafening.

The little cabin door opened, and out stepped a six foot Chinaman in a powder blue tux and a scuffed leather helmet. It was my best Man, Wilson Wu. He took off the helmet as he jogged up the aisle to polite applause.

"Sorry I'm late!" he whispered, slipping me the ring.

"What's with the blue tux?" I knew it wasn't the one I had reserved for him at Five Points Formal Wear.

"Picked it up last night during a fuel stop in Bozeman," he said. "It was prom night there, and blue was all they had left."

Hoppy was pulling my sleeve, asking me questions. "Of course I do!" I said. "You bet I do!" There was the business with the ring, the real one ("Is that platinum or just white gold?" Cindy gasped). Then it was time to kiss the bride.

Then it was time to kiss the bride again.

As soon as the ceremony was over, the twin fiddles struck up "Brandnew Tennessee Waltz," and we all drifted back to the tables in the shade of the Trimotor for refreshments. We found an unfamiliar Mayan-Chinese-looking dude eyeing the shrimp, and made him welcome. It was Wu's pilot friend, Huan Juan. Ess and Em served the congealed salad, after shrieking and hugging their father, whom they hadn't seen in six weeks.

"I should have known better than to worry, Wu," I said. "But did you say Bozeman? I thought that was in Montana."

"It is," he said, filling his plate with potato salad. "It's not on the way from eastern Quetzalcan to northern Alabama, unless you take the Great Triangle Route."

I knew he wanted me to ask, so I did: "The what?"

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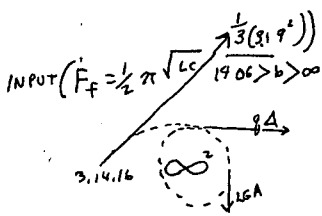
Smiling proudly, Wu took a stack of ham biscuits. "You know how a Great Circle Route looks longer on a map, but is in fact the shortest way across the real surface of the spherical Earth?"

"Uh huh." I grabbed some more of the shrimp. They were going fast. The twin fiddles launched into "Orange Blossom Special."

"Well, in all my struggles with the Time axes for EMS, I accidentally discovered the shortest route across the negatively folded surface of local space-time. Local meaning, our Universe. Look."

Wu took what I thought was a map out of the pocket of his tux and unrolled it. It was covered with figures:



"As you can see, it's sort of counter-intuitive," he said. "It means flying certain strict patterns and altitudes, and of course it only works in a three engine plane. But there it is. The shortest Great Triangle Space-Time Route from Quetzalcan City to Huntsville traverses the Montana high plains and skims the edge of Chesapeake Bay."

"Amazing," I said. The shrimp, which are as big as pistol grips, are grown in freshwater ponds in western Kentucky. I couldn't stop eating them.

"Numbers don't lie," said Wu. "Not counting fuel stops, and with a Ford Trimotor there are lots of those, it took Huan Juan and me only 22 hours to fly 6476.54 miles in a plane with a top speed of 112 mph. Let me try one of those giant shrimp."

"That's great," I said, looking through the thinning crowd for Candy. "But it's almost 12:20, and Candy has to be at work at one."

Wu looked shocked. "No Honeymoon?"

I shook my head. "Candy traded shifts for the trip to New York, and now she has to work nights, plus all weekend."

"It's not very romantic," said Candy, edging up beside me. "But it was the best we could do. Huan Juan, have you tried the giant shrimp?"

The pilot nodded without answering. He and Wu were consulting in whispers. They looked up at the clear blue sky, then down at the calculations on the unrolled paper.

"They are intimately entwined," I heard Wu say (I thought he was talking about Candy and me; I found out later he was talking about Time and Space). "All you have to do to unravel and reverse them is substitute this N for this 34.8, and hold steady at 2622 feet and 97 mph, air speed. Can you fly it?"

Huan Juan nodded, reaching for another giant shrimp.

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"What's going on?" I asked.

"Let's take a ride," said Wu, snapping his leather helmet under his chin. "Don't look so surprised. This Trimotor's equipped with a luxury Pullman cabin; it once belonged to a Latin American dictator."

"Where are we going?" I asked, pulling Candy to my side.

"Nowhere! We are going to fly a Great Triangle configuration, compressed and reversed, over Squirrel Ridge for twenty-three minutes, and you will experience it as, let's see—" He squinted, figuring—"Two point six hours of Honeymoon time. Better bring along some giant shrimp and ham biscuits."

Cindy handed Candy a bouquet. Hoppy and Bonnie and all our friends were applauding.

"What about—you know?" I whispered to Candy. I meant the Honeymoon lingerie she had bought at Sweet Nothings.

With a shy smile she pulled me aside. While Em and Ess tied shoes to the tail of the plane, and while Huan Juan and Wu cranked up the three ancient air-cooled radials with a deafening roar, and while the rest of the guests polished off the giant shrimp, Candy opened the top button of her tunic to give me a glimpse of what she was wearing underneath.

Then we got on the plane and soared off into the clear blue. But that's another story altogether. ●

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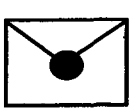

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ON BOOKS

Paul Di Filippo

Cool Air, Cold Sea

With the exception of *Night Relics* (1994) and *The Magic Spectacles* (1991), I believe I have read all of James Blaylock's books. What a rare privilege! Any literary era that boasts such a sure-handed, clear-sighted, carousel-brained writer among its living authors must be accounted a lucky one. With his latest, *Winter Tides* (Ace, hardcover, $21.95, 346 pages), Blaylock continues to deliver his distinctive brand of modern fantasy, yet with a slight change. The new book is a lateral move into adjacent territory, much like Lewis Shiner's non-SF novel *Slam* (1990) was for him, save that Blaylock retains a thread of the supernatural.

Huntington Beach, California, 1980: Dave Quinn, college student and surfer, saves a young girl from drowning—but only at the price of allowing her "evil twin" to perish in the same waves. Fifteen years later, Dave meets the grown survivor, Anne Morris, who unfortunately is attended by the vindictive ghost of dead sister Elinor. Dave's boss, Edmund Dalton, a purebred psychopath, begins to interact with both living and dead sister, pirouetting down a spiral of dangerous madness. How Dave and Anne deal with the predatory Edmund and his grisly "art," finding love and healing along the way, forms the simple yet enthralling story arc.

These characters are plainly cousins to others in Blaylock's oeuvre. Dave recalls both Howard Barton from *The Paper Grail* (1991) and Andrew Vanbergen from *The Last Coin* (1988), while Edmund is cast in the mold of Robert Argyle from *All the Bells on Earth* (1995), a man who has put himself at stubborn angles to life's compassionate current. Yet something has changed. Dave is less ditzy than his predecessors, and Edmund is meaner. (And he thus gets a much more ambiguous and partial redemption than Argyle.) Additionally, the charming looniness quotient in Blaylock's universe has been considerably trimmed. At times, *Winter Tides* even reads like an Elmore Leonard, or perhaps Jack Vance's *Bad Ronald* (1973). It's as if the eternal struggle between good and evil—always a fixture in Blaylock's books—has risen to such a pitch that there's not much silly space left for carp elixers and giant shoes. And although the subtle ghost motif is evoked with the deftness of a Robert Aickman or M.R. James, it could *almost* be stripped from the story: a further

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difference from earlier works, where the fantastic MacGuffins propelled everything. It's almost as if, having previously spotlighted the magic in everyday reality so effectively, Blaylock is now content to let it sink back down below the surface of events, where it is still vitally present, yet mainly undepicted.

Shaped with cunning symmetry, full of everyday heroism and devilry, proving that self-delusion is the only fatal flaw, *Winter Tides* is a work that, to use one of Blaylock's favorite words, truly "signifies."

Data and Sex

In 1990 appeared Greg Bear's *Queen of Angels*, a heady fusion of Bester's *The Demolished Man* (1953), Brunner's *Stand on Zanzibar* (1968), Silverberg's *The World Inside* (1971), and Zelazny's *The Dream Master* (1966). Above and beyond these saltings, the novel naturally radiated the unmistakable intelligence and art of Bear himself, a man known for putting both lyricism and surrealism into hard SF. Now comes a sequel, *Slant* (Tor, hardcover, $24.95, 349 pages). Equally well done, this novel continues the themes of the first, while also delivering all the thrills of a classic "heist" caper.

Bear's mid-twenty-first century milieu—a flawed Utopia, if such is possible—is based on massive nanotech and intimate understanding of human psychology. Almost all neuroses suffered by you and me can be extirpated by nano-remediation, granting a citizen Therapied status. The treatment is not compulsory, but it's a de facto requirement for entry to the good life, and only the efforts of the Therapied keep the "dataflow" economy chugging, allowing the disAffected drones to drown themselves in virtual reality dramas known as Yox, many of which are sheer pornography.

Our windows onto this world are several of the characters encountered in *Queen*, all a few years older: Mary Choy, Transformed cop; Martin Burke, wounded psychologist; and Jill, an artificial intelligence. Additionally, we are introduced to Jack Giffey, a mercenary intent on breaking into a high-security structure known as the Omphalos; Alice Grale, waning star in the sex industry; and Jonathan Bristow, a basically well-meaning young executive who soon steps into deep waters well over his head. Through their eyes, the reader will traverse all strata and scales of Bear's future, as a plot to destroy the Therapied—and hence the world—takes shape.

Bear's curious title is a key to both his innovative methodology and wide-ranging motives in this book. The notion of "slant" is multivalent: it refers to the future's style of architecture, to Bear's own keep-the-reader-off-kilter approach, and, most importantly, to gender and sex issues. (Is it possible along these lines to connect with the familiar "slash" fiction of the Trekker world?) Slant is the literal typographical mark that

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separates M/F, as well as the lubricious interface along which all human intercourse—physical and social—is conducted. Bear has many insights to share regarding the eternal conundrum of sex, and in this respect his book begins startlingly to converge toward Delany's *Triton* (1976).

Slant is one of the few novels to explicitly state that its "Real Year" (to use the Clute terminology) is as close to now, the "Sour Decades," as the author can make it. The fact that so little revision was needed to the seven-year-old prophecy of *Queen* is testimony to the fact that Greg Bear remains, as always, perched right on the very point of the virgule.

Beads on a Rod

If the spirit of *The Demolished Man* informs Bear's future, then it is equally certain that Bester's *The Stars My Destination* (1956) is the chief infusing afflatus of Damien Broderick's *The White Abacus* (Avon, trade, $12.50, 341 pages). This metapatterned, richly allusive novel ("a collage of appropriated icons," Broderick calls it in his afterword) is Baroque, Jacobean space opera simultaneously nostalgic and projective. Dedicated to Samuel Delany (who actually has a cameo herein as a canine cyborg spaceship pilot, Cap'n Chip), *Abacus* also harks back to such authors as Harness, Sturgeon, Kuttner, and Herbert. Oh, and did I mention the clever overlay of *Hamlet* (1601)? Clearly, this cunning magpie Broderick has assimilated, integrated, and exfoliated from a number of deep sources.

Several millennia from now, the universe is linked by hex gates, the Holophrastic Exchange that permits instant travel anywhere. Humans—the hu—share cosmic dominion with ai, artificial intelligences resident either immaterially in the Gestell (Broderick's collective virtual reality) or in physical form as robots. An exception to this codominion is the civilization of the Asteroids, cut off from the hex net by a quirk of physics. There, a semibarbaric, exclusively hu culture has evolved. The implicit role of Hamlet falls to one of the Asteroidial scions, Telmah Cima, whose father is murdered by a conniving uncle, uncle then wedding Telmah's mother and assuming a leadership that should rightfully be the youth's. Playing Jiminy Cricket to Telmah is Ratio, an ai, who eventually proves more puppetmaster than puppet.

It is significant that Ratio is the only character granted first-person narrative passages. This intimacy prepares the reader for the robot's eventual apotheosis and his subsequent guidance of Telmah and family onto a new plateau of evolution. Clearly, some Asimovian riffs are being executed here, to use the musical imagery that permeates *Abacus*.

Deviating from the model of Delany's own wide-ranging space operas (*Empire Star* [1966], *Babel-17* [1966], and *Nova* [1968]) and following the Besterian template,

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Broderick limits his canvas for the most part to our solar system, which possesses the speculative depth of Alexander Jablokov's *Carve the Sky* (1991). Whether envisioning an ad hoc space fountain or the organic substrate of the Gestell, Broderick manages to creatively rethink the underpinnings of his chosen mode.

Rife with swordplay and power guns, psychic abilities and captive hyperstrings, *The White Abacus* is—in the words of the discoverer of the hex effect—"discourse [that is] evasive and complex and illuminating."

She Blinded Me with Science

Right now, actually, I'm humming an older rock song than the one referenced above: Cream's "Badge," in fact, which atmospherically—and even lyrically—suits the afterglow engendered by reading Jonathan Lethem's *As She Climbed Across the Table* (Doubleday, hardcover, $22.95, 212 pages). Lethem's third novel, with its mix of centered surrealism and loopy groundedness, is as smoothly exhilarating as Eric Clapton's guitar licks, and possibly just as classic. And like any pop masterpiece, it goes down so smoothly that you don't notice the philosophical barbs until you're being reeled in.

Physicist Alice Coombs has made a certain decision of the heart: to fall in love with an artificially created pocket universe named "Lack," whose only manifestation in our continuum is a picky nothingingness that ingests random objects. Naturally Alice's newly discarded lover, Philip Engstrand, is dismayed at losing his mate. This book—narrated in Philip's hurt, ironic, hilariously bewildered tones—is the story of how Philip seeks to reclaim Alice from Lack.

Miraculously, *As She Climbed* functions equally well on a multitude of intriguing levels. It's plain old soap opera, the eternal triangle of girl, boy, and spacetime discontinuity. It's a retelling of "The Emperor's New Clothes," illustrating how people can delude themselves into believing that "nothing is something." It's a cheesy "invention rapes inventor" tale, like Koontz's *Demon Seed* (1973). And it's a pungent satire of academia, with just the section on Georges De Tooth, "resident deconstructionist," worth a dozen lesser campus novels.

Moreover, Lethem finds time to riff on several fellow authors. James Tiptree (another Alice), is evident in the heroine's feelings for Lack: "It's a basic response to . . . embrace the alien." *Crash*-era Ballard can be heard in this project by one of Philip's grad students: "[He] had applied for funding to study the geographic spray of athletes on a playing field following an injury. He wanted to understand the disbursement of bodies around the epicenter of the wounded player. . . ." And Terry Bisson's story, "The Shadow Knows," featuring an alien emptiness in a bowl, seems another definite referent.

Lethem's beautifully balanced,

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metaphorically rich prose propels this blackly jolly fable to a surprising yet satisfying conclusion. And I *swear* I can hear Ginger Baker's drumming on the last page.

Dueling Olympian Frauds

Bawdy, blasphemous, boisterous, and brash, Harvey Jacobs's *American Goliath* (St. Martin's, hardcover, $24.95, 346 pages) is a grab-you-by-the-lapels work of steampunk *par excellence*. More so than any recent book, it digs like a blood-maddened coonhound at the foxy roots of our modern age, uncovering the sources of our present-day hype, hypocrisy, religiosity and cant. All this while delivering an unforgettably rambunctious romp through the core of the previous century.

I've been a fan of Jacobs and his work ever since reading "The Egg of the Glak" nearly thirty years ago. As he was then, Jacobs remains a comic master in the vein of Mel Brooks and Ron Goulart. What's newly perceivable in Jacobs is a kind of Swiftian wisdom that coolly enumerates all of humanity's egregious flaws, weighs them in the balance with our pitifully limited virtues, finds humanity desperately deficient, and then says, "But hell, we're all we've got!"

Goliath is based on the true story of the Cardiff Giant Hoax. A petrified giant—or is it an antique statue?—is unearthed and put on display, billed as a genuine Genesis-era relic. Society goes wild, some folks get rich, others suffer, and then the whole shebang comes down with a suitably gigantic smash. Jacobs's narrative extends from 1868 to 1870, covering the whole affair from its secretive origins to its garish public end, with a suitably old-fashioned summary of the post-smash lives of the major characters.

Jacobs delivers scathing portraits of his cast, both the famous figures (Barnum, Vanderbilt, Boss Tweed) and lesser-known ones (George Hull, the chief perpetrator, and his whole family, as well as reporter Barnaby Rack, among many others). Nearly everyone in this book is a scoundrel: mean, venal, lustful, avaricious, or just plain stupid. And you love them! They themselves, all unknowing, in their hot-burning emotions and sprawling affairs, are the very giants they seek elsewhere. Complementing the humans are the outwardly silent minds of the original giant and his late-arriving competitor, Titan, revealed in stream-of-consciousness sections.

As Tom Thumb observes: "Crying and laughing are not the same. . . . But I can't say which is the higher art." Whichever emotion reigns, Jacobs has both covered like the flag draped over Goliath's shocking loins.

Ignorant Armies Clash: By Knight

Damon Knight has *forgotten* more about writing—and the teaching of writing—than you or I will ever master. So when a book by him entitled *Creating Short Fiction* (St. Martin's, trade, $13.95,

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209 pages), makes its revised appearance, you would be wise to snatch it up posthaste and read it closely—assuming of course that you have the slightest professional or amateur interest in how fiction is constructed. Sharing his extensive experience—triumphs and blunders alike—with the openness of a sage, Knight guides the novice through the creative maze where the entrance is intention and the exit is accomplishment. Stuffed with useful exercises, practical advice and lucid commandments (all made, Knight acknowledges, to be broken), this book is the equivalent of a college course you can carry in your backpack.

When we turn to Knight's own fiction, can we see the tenets he espouses at work? Yes and no. Sure, you can point to instances in Knight's *Humpty Dumpty* (Tor, trade, $13.95, 287 pages) that illustrate various writerly principles. But Knight is working at a level so far above the journeyman that the dazzle of his cloth makes the warp and woof invisible.

Wellington Stout is visiting Milan at the behest of his brother, Tom, there to deliver a mysterious package to one Roger Wort. Fate intervenes when Stout is shot in the head in a restaurant by a misaiming waiter ostensibly bent on killing his boss. Stout awakens in a hospital bed, bullet lodged inoperably in his brain, but with prospects for a recovery. Too bad the entire world is now melting around him, people, places, and events whirled into a Dickian, Sheckleyan, Carrollian, van Vogtian kaleidoscope.

Stout's rather Kingsley Amis-resonant first-person voice will guide us through the incredible events to follow. Across Europe, across the Atlantic to America, then across alien-invaded America itself, Stout travels amidst the most bizarre circumstances set down in recent fiction, pursued by various conspirators and pursuing his own grail of comprehension, recapitulating his past to bring about a future that might never happen. This narrative is, in the terms of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, a bardo journey, where all monsters and angels represent psychic components.

Realizing, as Thomas Pynchon has observed, that surrealism cannot be produced by just "any old combination of details," Knight has formulated a gaudy yet necessitous dream logic and armory of symbols which he adheres to with the rigor of a hard SF writer. (In this I see the fruition of the chapter in Knight's *In Search of Wonder* [1956] entitled "Symbolism.") Moreover, Knight has done something amazing with what could have been a helter-skelter plot. The action of *Humpty Dumpty* is simultaneously spiral and linear, circular yet forward-moving. There is a curious sidewise progress to events, culminating in Stout's final trial. Never is there any lull in the action, or failure to captivate.

This book finally reminds me of another great bardo voyage: Alasdair Gray's *Lanark* (1981). By turns

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wistful and horrifying, epiphanical and dismaying, *Humpty Dumpty* is an egg you must candle.

Love is First

How to revitalize the Matter of Britain? After hundreds of years and thousands of retellings, is there any new flesh left with which to cloak those hoary Arthurian bones? I would have bet against the proposition, had I not kept my own version of one of Clarke's Laws in mind: "If a respected literary critic says it's impossible for a writer to do something, then some writer somewhere will inevitably do it."

No one is more capable of overthrowing staleness than A.A. Attanasio, he of the mystical insights and capacious word-hoard. Having determined to turn his hand to a massive revisionist sequence of Camelotian derring-do, he pulls out all the stops, giving us a new version of the old myth that is at once faithful and rebellious—sort of the Lancelot treatment.

The Dragon and the Unicorn (1996) first set the stage. We were introduced here to the peculiar cosmology of Attanasio's post-Roman Britain. Quantum beings—seen by humans as deities and as other fantastic creatures (the Unicorn of the title, for instance)—inhabit the invisible electromagnetic flux tree rooted in the earth. At the globe's core curls another demigod, the Dragon, a kind of telluric patron. There is currently war among the godlings and their human pawns. Those entities who resemble the Norse pantheon are manipulating the encroaching Vikings and other sea-raiders. The Dragon and the Fire Lords are backing the native Celts and their allies. On earth, Ygrane, Celtic priestess, and Uther Pendragon, Christian king, follow through battle and bliss their convergent destinies, which culminate in the birth of their son, Arthor. At the center of the tangled web is Merlin, who in this version is a waveform demon voluntarily trapped in human form.

Attanasio's prose and angle of attack recall many fine writers. There are tinges of Zelazny in the mixing of modern terms ("laser," "Big Bang") with the archaic. Some of Poul Anderson's bardic gloom intrudes. Merlin's disembodied demon cousins are highly Lovecraftian, the sea-raiders straight out of Howard. And Attanasio's elves could have stepped from Vance's *Lyonesse* series. But the total blend, cemented by Attanasio's lapidary prose, is unique.

The Eagle and the Sword (HarperPrism, trade, $14.00, 340 pages) opens fifteen years after Arthor's birth. The once and future orphan king—who is literally the reincarnation of famed warrior Cuchulain—is a broody semi-berserker, a far cry from the noble figure most of us have in mind. (This reinterpretation of Arthur is equivalent to the job Paul Park did on Jesus in his *The Gospel of Corax* [1996].) The action of this book, unlike the first, takes place over a relatively short time, basically just a few days. But in that short interval Arthor's total conception of the

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universe and his place in it will open up, making him fit at novel's end to pull Excalibur from the stone.

Attanasio manages to maintain a vigorous suspense despite the foregone broad outlines of his story. He changes the chronology of events: for instance, Morgeu (Morgan the Fey) seduces Arthor early, before he is even anointed, and she imprisons Merlin in a tree, but only temporarily. Also, the fate of the secondary characters is always in jeopardy. A long pivotal section recounting a battle in the underworld for Excalibur rockets by as if you were present yourself in the hollow hills.

Blending Wim Wenders, Kali, voodoo, Buddhism, complexity theory, and the comedy of T. H. White, *The Eagle and the Sword* proves that old myths never die, as long as they have brilliant bards to reinvent them.

The Whisky Priest Returns

Since 1988, British writer Ian MacLeod has proven himself a powerful short-story writer in issues of *Asimov's* and elsewhere. His understated, melancholic prose, with its focus on small lives that open out interiorly to vast fields of meaning, has brought us such fine stories as "Green" and "Grownups." Now these two and eight others are collected in *Voyages by Starlight* (Arkham House, hardcover, $21.95, 269 pages), with a preface by Michael Swanwick. Taken together, these tales echo and compound such mainstream masters as Hardy, Lawrence and Dickens, while also evoking thoughts of Nancy Kress, Philip José Farmer, and James Tiptree. MacLeod's world is a cloistered, at times claustrophobic one: his characters seem resigned to a universe where real change is almost an impossibility. ("Marnie" speaks most devastingly to this belief.) Yet still, bravery and hope persist, and small incremental steps forward get made.

In "Marnie," the time-traveling protagonist observes that "the tantalising [cultural] fear of a black and glassy wasteland . . . was fading" during the era he visits, our own. Yet the fading of a fear does not mean that such futures themselves are now bypassed. In his debut novel, *The Great Wheel* (Harcourt, Brace, hardcover, $24.00, 458 pages), MacLeod chooses to portray—at least in part—just such a future. Expanding the tropes and themes of his stories, this debut novel is a quiet stunner.

Approximately one hundred and fifty years from now, the world is somewise amiable, and somewise ugly. Europe and other First World enclaves (there is not a word about America in this future, so we have apparently bitten the dust) have retained a very high standard of technological living after global war and ecological disaster. But other places, such as the refugee-thronged North Coast of Africa (now called "the Endless City," or "Magulf"), have been plunged back to superstitious near-barbarism, subsisting on their export of cheap

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labor and on crumbs from the foreign elite.

Into this Paul Bowlesian milieu plunges Father John Alston, Christian priest. His assigned mission is simply to run his parish and maintain a charity medical clinic. Shades of Wolfe's Patera Silk—save that unlike Silk, Father John has lost his faith. Compounding this spiritual disaster is an impulsive love affair with a native woman, Laurie Kalmar, and a mystery to be solved involving a plague and its source.

MacLeod's main thrust here is the exploration of Father John's character, and at this he succeeds eminently. There are few SF novels that leave you feeling you've encountered a real human being you might bump into on your own street; *The Great Wheel* is an exception to this generic deficiency. All its characters emerge with heartbreaking vividness. But this is not to say that MacLeod neglects his world-building. Far from it. This future is subtly, generously, credibly built up from numerous small details (the wink of an LED implant from underneath a sweater sleeve); large conceits (devices called "cloudpickers" that shape the weather); and genuine speculation (the probable evolution of the Net). Like a Geoff Ryman future, MacLeod's language-shifted, patchwork terrain is at once estranging and enfolding.

MacLeod handles his symbol set deftly, the central image being the enormous Ferris Wheel of the title, which is also of course the Hindu cycle of death and birth. His main theme is an existential one: should a person ever simply "give up" (that exact phrase surfaces consistently throughout the text)? John's brother, Hal, who many years ago committed a particularly fiendish techno-suicide, is the exemplar of the abdicatory position so attractive to Father John. John's own escape from such an end remains in doubt until the final pages.

With thurible-wafted fragrances from the work of William Vollmann and Walter Miller, Clifford Simak and Graham Greene, *The Great Wheel* is an ultimately hopeful Mass you are invited to celebrate.

Four Bouquets

The many modes of Lucius Shepard are all on display to be savored in his newest collection, *Barnacle Bill the Spacer* (Orion Millennium, hardcover £16.99, 292 pages). In terms of famous Shepard tales past, "A Little Night Music" evokes the same necroglamour as *Green Eyes* (1984); the centerpiece, "Human History," inhabits the surreal Wild West territory of "Bound for Glory"; and "Beast of the Heartland" is akin to "Life of Buddha." With Ellisonian vigor, Shepard eviscerates the smiling liars and hollow humans among us, striving to whip us into something deserving the name of mankind. This collection is a fine appetizer for his upcoming novel from Zeising Books, *A Handbook of American Prayer*.

A couple of years ago, I had the

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immense privilege of performing a joint reading with Chip Delany. Onstage, holding Xeroxed, dual-columned pages of something called "Atlantis: Model 1924," he and I read parallel texts simultaneously, evoking a strange bivocal sound that moved in and out of coherence. A neat experience. And that was all the mysterious work remained to me (the subsequent Incunabula printing of it unavailable), until just recently when I picked up *Atlantis* (Wesleyan University Press, trade, $14.95, 212 pages). Subtitled "Three Tales," this book recounts, first, a major slice from the life of Delany's father; then, in the middle, a portion of Chip's own childhood; and lastly, a segment of his adult life. The first section—that from which we read aloud—is the most affecting. In Wolfean, Faulknerian language, the New York of the twenties is conjured into being. The following sections are alternately laugh-out-loud humorous and painfully tragic. Over the whole work shimmers the aurora of memory, casting its tricksy light.

The exhaustively meticulous and intelligent folks at Fedogan & Bremer (3721 Minnehaha Avenue South, Minneapolis, MN 55406) have now assembled the collected horror and fantasy writing of Donald Wandrei (Arkham House cofounder and friend to Lovecraft) under the title *Don't Dream* (hardcover, $29.00, 394 pages). Dating from 1926 to 1967, mostly plucked from the early pages of *Weird Tales*, these stories remain vivid, effective and charming. Whether Wellsian ("The Nerveless Man"), Poe-like ("The Lady in Gray"), Kuttneresque (the title piece), or Hodgsonian ("Spawn of the Sea"), Wandrei's fiction showed intelligence, flair, and reckless imagination. As President Williams says, in "When the Fire Creatures Came," after being informed by the inventor Dave Harkness that the only way to save America from alien invasion is to blow half the continent up: "What titanic vision! Eternal daredevilry of youth!"

No showboating, just the straight, clean performance, culminating in a knockout blow. That's what John Kessel—much more elegantly—says of the writing of James Patrick Kelly in the introduction to *Think Like a Dinosaur* (Golden Gryphon Press, hardcover, $22.95, 275 pages). The stories in this handsomely designed and crafted volume (the first from James Turner's new firm, to be found at 364 West Country Lane, Collinsville, IL 62234) certainly merit Kessel's praise. Drawn from 1984 to 1995 and mostly from the pages of *Asimov's*, Kelly's stories are all classics or near-so. Bouncing between contemporary and future venues, Kelly employs his ergonomic, micrometer-machined prose to delineate both character and philosophical conundrums. Always Kelly, he can still resonate with writers such as Kit Reed ("Faith"), Heinlein ("Breakaway, Backdown") and the bozos of Firesign Theater ("Standing in Line with Mister Jimmy"). In his exem-

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plary "Big Guy," the outlaw portion of virtual reality is called the Way Out: that's where Kelly lives and works.

Pocketful of Miracles

For topnotch comic book SF, make an effort to pick up *Michael Moorcock's Multiverse* (DC Comics, monthly, $2.50, 32 pages). Based on his latest trilogy involving the von Bek clan (reviewed by me in these pages), this book features the standout work of artists Walter Simonson, Mark Reeve, and John Ridgway, with uncompromisingly intelligent scripts by Moorcock himself.

Ed Emshwiller was one of our field's premier artists, for a time omnipresent and omnipotent. In addition, he was an independent film maker of no small talent and fame. This latter aspect of his career is highlighted in a catalog issued by the Anthology Film Archives, *Intersecting Images: The Cinema of Ed Emshwiller* ($12.00 + $3.00 S&H, 72 pages). Editor Robert Haller has assembled a congenial mix of interviews, appreciations and bibliographic data, wonderfully nostalgic and handily informative all at once.

What has thirty-four legs and goes on tour? The seventeen writers responsible for the round-robin novel, *Ghor, Kin-Slayer* (Necronomicon Press, trade, $8.95, 176 pages). Well, they won't literally be on tour, since some of the hands associated with this sword-and-sorcery rampage have passed away since its inception in the seventies (Frank Long, Manly Wellman, Karl Wagner, Warner Munn). But despite being lost for so long, this patchwork berserker of a book still kicks Aquilonian butt. The first chapter is a fragment from Robert Howard himself, introducing us to a child left abandoned in the snowy wastes. The wolfish lad grows up to be Ghor, Howard's patented *uber*-savage, and—with stylistic and thematic continuity—writers as diverse as Moorcock, Lumley, van Vogt, and Lupoff trace his bloody footprints across a barbaric landscape. Lots of fun for readers (and most likely the writers too).

Charles Platt doesn't edit SF these days or write as much fiction as he once did, since he began reporting for *Wired* magazine. But SF's partial loss is journalism's gain—and ours too, if we pick up his newest volume, *Anarchy Online* (HarperPrism, trade, $14.00, 367 pages). In these pages, derived partially from work published in *Wired*, Platt surveys the State of the Net, soberly and fearlessly, falling prey neither to hype nor distress, and renders a tantalizing portrait of cyber-reality and cyber-potential. This neatly designed book is laid out Ace Double-style, the front half concerning itself with "Net crime," the back half with "Net sex." There's overlap, of course, but Platt keeps a clear focus, using exemplary stories (about hacker Kevin Mitnick and faux-sociologist Martin Rimm) to illuminate broader issues. Objectively viewing anarchists and authoritarians, Platt can be as dryly funny as

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P.J. O'Rourke and as visionary as Bruce Sterling. Enlist him as your intelligent agent today!

Once upon a time, there was an axis of SF whose defining points were writers such as James Sallis, Langdon Jones, David Masson, and John Sladek. That kind of hard-as-nails yet softly dreamlike writing is out of style these days, and more's the shame. Thank goodness then for the brave and capable Stepan Chapman, who picks up this oneiric standard from the field of battle and carries it high. Chapman's *The Troika* (Ministry of Whimsy Press, trade, $14.99, 251 pages) is a masterful dream voyage through realms of terror and strange beauty. Three souls trapped in a synthetic world by a crazed godling must work out their own salvation against all odds, finding unity and cohesion despite their differences. Like Ellison's "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream," this novel portrays the indomitability of the human spirit, all the while permuting reality in fascinating ways. If musician Robyn Hitchcock were an author, this is the book he'd write. But luckily for us, Chapman got there first.

Publisher addresses: Anthology Film Archives, 32 Second Avenue, NY, NY 10003. Necronomicon Press, PO Box 1304, West Warwick, RI 02893. The Ministry of Whimsy Press, PO Box 4248, Tallahassee, FL 32315.●

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SF Conventional Calendar

With WorldCon in Australia next year, NASFiC's in LA. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of cons, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 13107B Autumn Wood Way, Fairfax VA 22033. The hot line is (703) 449-1276. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons) leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons as Filthy Pierre, with a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

MARCH 1998

27–29—**I-Con.** For info, write: **Box 550, Stony Brook NY 11790.** Or phone: **(516) 632-6045** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Stony Brook NY (if city omitted, same as in address) at the State University. Guests will include: Spinrad, Donaldson, Pohl, Clement, Kandel, Peel, Steele, J. N. Williamson, Visitor.

27–29—**AggieCon. (409) 845-1515.** A & M campus, College Station TX. Asprin, Lansdale, O'Quinn, Bolesney.

27–29—**CoastCon. (601) 435-5217.** Beach Broadwater Resort East, Biloxi MS. Weiss, Hickman, Effinger, Hambly.

27–29—**Deliverance. (0181) 904-5588.** Moat House, Stoke-on-Trent England. Keating, Darrow, Wells. Media.

APRIL 1998

3–5—**5Con. jevote@hotmail.com.** Smith College Seelye Hall, Northampton MA. Five Colleges con.

3–5—**NeoCon. (316) 691-5636.** Wichita KS. J. Dalmas, Lubov, A. Donovan, L. Abbey, C. J. Cherryh, J. Fancher.

3–5—**MadiCon. (540) 568-6000.** (Web) bidwellcc@jmu.edu. James Madison University, Harrisonburg VA.

3–5—**CostumeCon. (314) 727-0972.** Holiday Inn Westport, St. Louis MO. Costumers' big annual do. Great show.

3–5—**Anime Central. (847) 776-7578.** Holiday Inn O'Hare, Rosemont (Chicago) IL. S. Frazier, S. Pearl, A. Winn.

3–5—**Creation. (818) 409-0960.** Pasadena Center, Pasadena CA. Star Trek, Babylon 5, etc. Always many stars.

3–5—**VulKon. (954) 434-6060.** St. Petersburg FL. Commercial Star Trek and SF media event.

10–12—**BaltiCon, Box 686, Baltimore MD 21203. (410) 563-2737.** Omni, Baltimore MD. Turtledove, J. Lee, Kondo.

10–12—**MiniCon, Box 8297, Lake St. Stn., Minneapolis MN 55408. (612) 333-7533.** Radisson. G. Dozois, J. M. Ford.

10–12—**NorwesCon, Box 24207, Seattle WA 98124. (206) 270-7850.** Doubletree, SeaTac WA. Neil Gaiman, B. Froud.

10–12—**UK National Con, 1 Waverley Way, Carshalton Beeches SM5 3LQ, UK.** Picadilly Hotel, Manchester UK.

17–19—**Contraption, Box 214055, Auburn Hills MI 48321. (810) 853-0736.** Troy MI. Stasheff, Breuers, VanTilburg.

17–19—**FILKONntario, 145 Rice Ave. #98, Hamilton ON L9C 6R3.** Airport Days Inn, Toronto ON. SF folksinging.

AUGUST 1998

5–9—**BucCONeer, Box 314, Annapolis Junction MD 20701. (410) 563-2737.** WorldCon. $130 to 6/15; more at door.

AUGUST 1999

26–29—**No. American SF Con (NASFiC), Box 8442, Van Nuys CA 91409.** Marriott, Anaheim CA. Pournelle, Lynchi.

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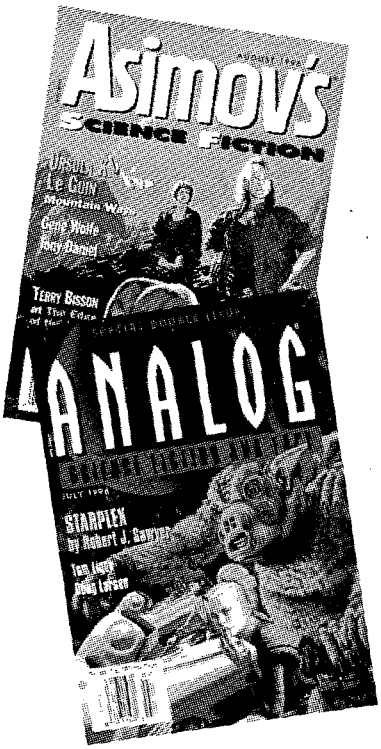

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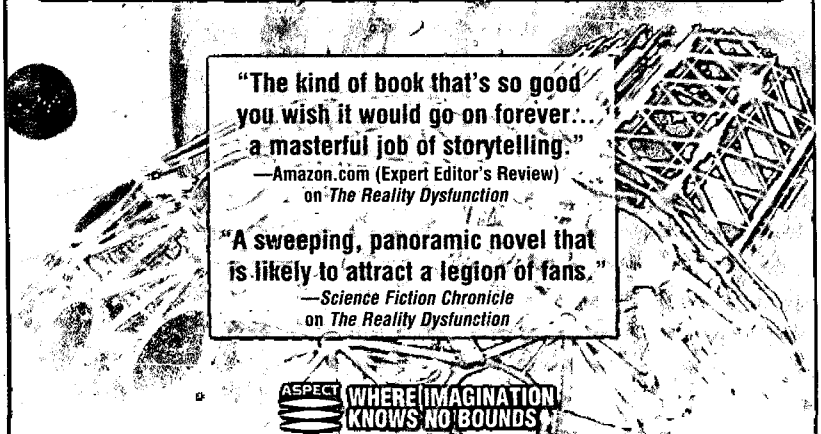

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